THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON: THE REVELATION OF THE SELF

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PREFACE

Several thematic analyses of Emily Dickinson's poems have been written since the publication of the Harvard edition of her poems and letters. What stared me in the face in my study of her poetry was the fact of her spiritual alienation which was not entirely of her own choice. She was driven to isolation by the social and religious forces operating in the New England of her day. As a defence against a world which seemed chaotic and hostile to her, she dedicated herself to poetry and set out to explore the secret of the self. She made self-revelation her chief commitment to poetry and constantly evoked the epiphany of the self to make it the focal point of her poetry. I have examined and analysed her poetry from this new angle. This fresh point of view explains and justifies, I hope, the sub-title of my thesis: "The Revelation of the Self".

Giving pivotal role to the self, Emily Dickinson constructed her theories of reality and art. Making the song of an oriole the metaphor for objective reality in a poem discussed in Chapter V, she debates with a skeptic whether the song exists in the tree or in the consciousness of the listener and concludes that the song is "in thee". Not disputing the

separate identity of the objective reality, she argues that it can be perceived by the consciousness whose seat is the self. The self is also the centre round which impressions and responses cluster like the filings in a magnetic field. The self is "the indestructible estate" and can contain all, be all and displace all. In her famous cryptic remark, she states that, as a poet, her "business is Circumference". This statement has been variously interpreted to establish her theory of poetry. I have discussed it exhaustively, I hope, in chapter III, and I believe that the circumference is the one projected by the self, with itself being the all important and all perceiving centre.

The gradual recognition of the worth and merit of Emily Dickinson's poetry has been referred to by Jay Leyda as the "thaw of a frozen image". Indeed, it is only a "thaw", for a large part of her poetry remains inscrutable and enigmatic. The researcher is not encouraged by the missing traditional tools with which he works. There is no definitive biography as many facts about her life are still unknown. She has left no memoirs. The only source of knowledge about her singularly uneventful life is her letters. They embody her guarded comments on religion and art but they are more often than not too cryptic to be clearly deciphered. The remarkable two volumes of Jay Leyda's The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson have thrown some light but his massive compilation of facts from various sources

and their startling juxtaposition, still leave the poet a shadowy figure. In the face of these insurmountable odds, I have endeavoured to remove some popular misconceptions about the major themes of her poetry and I have established, as best I could, the fact that there was hardly anything common between her and her illustrious contemporaries. In this effort, I have leaned heavily on the primary sources: her poems and letters.

I have harnessed my Indian sensibility in making brief comparisons between her poems and the lyrics of Rig Veda, the devotional songs of Kabir and Mira Bai. I know that parallelism is frowned upon in a doctoral thesis but the resemblances were so compelling that I could not successfully resist the temptation to mention them. There are, however, passing references of this nature and, I think, they do not injur the main body of my thesis. I may point out in all modesty and humility that I was the first Indian critic to point out these coincidences of thought.

I have also discovered for the first time, I believe, the affinity between Emily Dickinson and modern American poetry, and chapter X deals exclusively with this subject. I was tempted to work out her resemblance with "Confessional Poets", particularly, with Sylvia Plath. Emily Dickinson knew that "Gethsemane -/ Is but a Province - in Being's Centre", and like her, it was from this agonized centre that Sylvia Plath derived her poetry. But

unlike Sylvia Plath, there is no justification of the self to the self in Emily Dickinson. In her poetry, it is the confrontation of the self with the non-self which gives the requisite responses. Sylvia Plath's morbid obsession with death and her consequent suicide have no counterparts in Emily Dickinson's life. I, therefore, abandoned the idea and I have mentioned a non-existent portion of my thesis only because I do not entirely rule out the possibility of her affinity with "Confessional Poets".

The inspiration to write on Emily Dickinson came during my stay at Harvard University as a Fulbright Scholar in 1959-60. I presented several research papers on Emily Dickinson in the seminars organised by the USEFI and USIS. Six chapters of the present thesis were published (without footnotes) in the form of a small book, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: The Flood Subjects, (New Delhi, 1969), dedicated to the late Dr. Olive I. Reddick. Prior to the publication of the book, some chapters were published in journals or included in books. In recent years, chapter X was included in Essays on Modern American Poetry, (USIS, 1971) and chapter I in Aligarh Journal of English Studies, (Aligarh, 1977). The period of my research thus extends to about two decades. One of the reasons of this long delay may be the fact that my self-assurance was often eroded. I took a long time to comprehend fully her strategy of paradox and chapter IX ("Immortality") illustrates the slippery ground,

between negation and affirmation of faith, which I have perilously tread. This fact is applicable to all the chapters, including the one one her biography, ("Herself"). Another reason is that I did not avail the study leave granted for research and carried on my work in addition to a busy schedule of teaching. In that respect, I am a lone wolf and like to be so.

Salamatullah Khan
October 12, 1977

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Chapter I

THE REBEL

In thinking of the life and art of Emily Dickinson, one is aware of many apparent paradoxes. She repudiated the pervasive authority of the Puritan orthodoxy, but her thinking was conditioned by and her ethical norms and social concerns were derived from the same Puritan tradition of the Connecticut Valley.[1] She wrote poems with irreverent references to God, sometimes bordering on blasphemy,[2] but the main body of her poetry and her letters are informed with a deep sense of piety. She imposed on herself an austere seclusion in order to dedicate herself to the writing of poetry, but repeatedly refused to publish her poems. She rejected transcendentalism as a world view which envisaged man as the source of all moral law supplanting revelation with intuition, but shared with the transcendentalists their distrust of institutions and their insistence on self-reliance for self-realization. She read the poems of Holmes, Whittier, Longfellow and Emerson, the last with some admiration,

1 Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson (Harvard, 1960), p.234.

2 The Poetry of Emily Dickinson, 3 Vols., Ed. Thomas H. Johnson, (Harvard, 1955) (All quotations are from this edition with number of volumes and number of poems given in the brackets). See Vol. III, 1461, where she attributes duplicity to God.

but forged altogether a new medium of poetic expression and in reading her poetry, we seldom think of her contemporaries. She derived her metres from books of hymnology commonly available in her days but enriched them with her own innovations to write secular hymns:

> In the name of the Bee -
> And of the Butterfly -
> And of the Breeze - Amen! (Vol.I, 18)

She made self-revelation her chief commitment to poetry but looked upon the projection of her self objectively as one out with a lantern looking for herself.[3] She often wrote poems on conventional subjects of the nineteenth century like death or immortality but infused them with new meaning and scope by what I have called elsewhere,[4] her strategy of paradox. She eagerly found a literary "perceptor" in Higginson but in spite of the deference with which she received his advice, she never incorporated it in the body of her poetry. She always addressed the men with whom she is generally believed to have fallen in love, as "master", "friend" or "preceptor", and one strongly suspects that she never allowed them even to know the closely-guarded secret of her heart. And so on. In trying to analyse these paradoxes and to place them in their proper context, we

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3 The Letters of Emily Dickinson, 3 Vols., Ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward, (Harvard 1958), hereafter referred to as Letters. See letter number 182 in Vol.II, pp.323-24.

4 See chapter IX, p. 237

realise the highly complex and sophisticated self of the poet. This realisation often erodes our confidence, for there is no fixed image of the poet. To quote Richard B. Sewall, "teachers send their students to Donne and Yeats and Frost with an assurance (justified or otherwise) not yet applicable to Emily Dickinson".[5] No wonder then that we still ask and ask, and, in our bewilderment try to identify, what Jay Leyda calls, the "omitted center"[6] not only of her poetry but also of her personality.

II

These paradoxes, however, reflect, in a way, the conflicting forces operating in the contemporary social, religious and literary traditions of the nineteenth century America. In matters of religion, the theocracy established in Massachusetts by the founding fathers had considerably weakened by the end of the seventeenth century. Church membership had declined by the severe orthodox doctrine that God alone determined His elect and that no one could ever know whether he had been chosen or rejected. But Solomon Stoddard brought about a reversal of this policy of self-banishment by admitting to communion all who wished to receive it. He argued that since it was not possible

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5 Richard B. Sewall, Emily Dickinson, (Prentice-Hall, N.J., 1963), p.7.

6 Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, 2 Vols. (New Haven, 1960) Vol. I, p. XXI (Hereafter referred to as Jay Leyda).

to know the will of God, there was greater likelihood of God's mercy on those who took up the covenant. By defying the Boston theologians, Stoddard increased the membership of the church in Connecticut Valley with its diocesan centre at Northompton and organised an association of the Valley churches which exercised powerful authority for fifty years till his death in 1729. His grandson, Jonathan Edwards, who succeeded him, reverted to God's absoluteness, to the salvation only for His elect and to the final judgment of God as not a foreseeable end. The severity of the doctrines preached by him, alienated his parishners who consisted mostly of prosperous land speculators and merchants.

These controversies had long ceased to agitate people in the Valley by the time Emily Dickinson was born in 1830, but they shaped the moral and ethical concerns and, in that limited sense, they were still compulsively operative in the Valley. Along with the convictions of the Puritan past, which were still held and enunciated by the First Church, there existed the Unitarian liberalism which was becoming increasingly popular in Boston and its neighbourhood. Emily Dickinson was introduced to Unitarian thinking early in life by Benjamin Franklin Newton who was a Unitarian and who, according to her, "taught me immortality"[7] and "a faith in things unseen, and in life again, much nobler and much more blessed."[8] She was instinctively in

7 Letters, Vol. II, L261, p.404.

8 Ibid., Vol. I, L153, p. 282.

agreement with some of the tenets of Unitarianism and, like the Unitarians, totally rejected the belief in an arbitrary God and revolted against the idea of a chosen few elected to salvation. In one of her poems, she derisively concludes that only the inanimate stone can fulfill the absolute decree:

> How happy is the little Stone
> That rambles in the Road alone,
> And doesn't care about Careers
> And Exigencies never fears -
> Whose Coat of elemental Brown
> A passing Universe put on,
> And independent as the Sun
> Associates or glows alone,
> Fulfilling absolute Decree
> In casual simplicity -- Vol. III, 1510

She also shared with the Unitarians their religions tolerance and their emphasis on the importance of character. But she did not accept Unitarianism completely as a faith or religious doctrine.

Her rejection of Puritan orthodoxy seemed final enough, for like Harriet Beecher Stowe, she never accepted the dogmas of Calvinism. In her extreme reaction, she wrote to Higginson in 1862 that the members of her family are religious "and address an Eclipse, every morning - whom they call their father -"[9]. Again, in a poem written four years before her death, she said:

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9 Ibid., Vol. II, 261, p.404.

Those - dying then,
Knew where they went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found - Vol. III, 1551

←——I have quoted only two examples; there are many more. But these moments of negation are exceptions rather than the general rule. They represent the doubts without which there can be no stable belief and about which she said metaphorically that

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul - Vol. II, 501

←——There are many poems of affirmation which present God as the Prince of the Kingdom of Heaven, who Himself is the unity and is duplicated in all divine objects (Vol. II, 721). Again, she visualised the cities of heaven, "And God - at every Gate -" (Vol. II, 615).

From the arguments above, it is obvious that what she revolted against was the sacrosant piety. As I said elsewhere,[10] she was a non-conformist of a new kind and her non-conformity consisted in her rejection of the unthinking belief of the devout. As against this rejection, she clung to some of the significant aspects of her Puritan tradition which held that man's intuitions were too untrustworthy to replace revelation, that he was imperfect and could not be the source of moral law, that he was dependent and must seek revelation even if it was not

10 See Chapter IX, "Immortality", p. 237

guaranteed. These beliefs of Emily Dickinson explain why, in moments of spiritual crisis, she turned to Edward Everette Hale and Washington Gladden and Charles Wadsworth instead of finding peace and consolation in the essays of George Ripley or the sermons of Theodore Parker. But she understood fully the fact and the consequences of her spiritual suffering and isolation. "I am standing alone in rebellion", she wrote in 1850.[11] Making Gethsemane, the garden outside Jerusalem where Jesus was betrayed and arrested, the metaphor of spiritual agony, she wrote:

> Gethsemane –
> Is but a Province – in Being's Centre Vol.II, 553

And it was from this tormented centre of her being that she created the tragic poetry of her spiritual solitude.

III

Closely allied to Unitarianism, transcendentalism in the New England of Emily Dickinson's days, though secular and liberal in its concept, was predominantly ethical and asserted the primacy of spiritual over material values. It saw God or Deity as the pervading principle manifest in all the objects of the universe and in all men everywhere. It envisaged that God and the universe were one entity and that the macrocosm was reflected

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11 Letters, Vol.I, 35, p.94.

in the microcosm - the soul of man. Hence, man's intuitions and his inner light were sure guides of his spiritual well-being and there was no need of man's submission to any authority outside himself. In believing man to be an integral part of the cosmos, transcendentalism radiated optimism in its mystical assurance about the destiny of man. These winds of doctrine and idealistic philosophy blowing from Concord and Boston had deeply influenced the writers of New England. Emily Dickinson was also stirred but her thinking was not affected or altered. She said that "I see - New Englandly" (Vol.I, 285) but she was more deeply affected by the alienating disintegration of the social and religious community of New England. While sharing the distrust of external authority and institution with transcendentalism, she repudiated its basic assumptions.

One of the fundamental premises of the transcendentalist poets was of nature (written with a capital N) as a divine analogy. This nature cult, (if I may use the word) had gained wide acceptance for more than a hundred years and had formed an essential part of the poetic heritage which had come down to Emily Dickinson from Thomson and the English romantics to Bryant and Emerson. In Emersonian terminology, it provided the facile "Correspondence" between man and the cosmos or between the creature and the Creator. Emily Dickinson rejected this fundamental premise by declaring: "Nature and God - I neither knew." (Vol.II, 835). "Nature is a Haunted House" - she told

Higginson,[12] and wrote again in one of her poems:

> But nature is a stranger yet;
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her haunted house,
> Nor simplified her ghost. Vol.III, 1400

Nature, according to her, is a mysterious house, ordained and regulated by God, and its secrets have not been revealed to man.

In another poem, she apparently had a dig at the transcendentalists who believed that the tremendous and varied spectacle of nature was only for man:

> A little Madness in the Spring
> Is wholesome even for the King,
> But God be with the Clown -
> Who ponders this tremendous scene -
> This whole Experiment of Green -
> As if it were his own. Vol.III, 1333

A King is traditionally expected to remain calm and dignified when confronted with excitement but if his restraint is broken by the exuberance and the renewal of life in spring and he also shares the ecstasy ("madness") of the season, it does him good. But it is the height of clownish presumption to believe that the vast phenomena of nature has been ordained for man. The philosophical stance of Emily Dickinson concerning nature is explicit enough to indicate the departure she had made from the

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12 Ibid., Vol.II, 459A, p.554.

cult of nature propounded by the transcendentalists. She looked upon nature with the eyes of a painter, "Nature" is what we see", (Vol.II, 668) and her best realized poems are genre portraits shorn of all sentimentality.

Another trend in the American poetry of the post Civil War era was that of Ideal Poetry whose champions Richard Henry Stoddard, Edmond C. Stedman, Bayard Taylor, Thomas B. Aldrich and Richard W. Gilder made a cult of evasion to escape the harsh realities following the Civil War. Some of them pretended that they continued the literary heritage of the past and wanted to preserve poetry from the gross materialism of the era. The aesthetics of Ideal Poetry was later summarised in Stedman's The Nature and Elements of Poetry (1892) which propounded the primacy of beauty and the idea that art was allied to polite morality. This ideality provided forms to disengage the mind of the poet from the felt experience of life, leading it to the exotic, and building a refuge elevated to a national literary doctrine. Emily Dickinson was completely untouched by this movement and considering the coldly contemptuous review of her Poems (1890) by the idealist poet and critic, Aldrich, it can be safely inferred that she was basically antithetical to Ideal Poetry.

IV

Alienated spiritually from the community of a disintegrating New England in which both Puritanism and Transcendentalism were

losing ground and seemed less and less convincing as world-views, she was also isolated from the social community by her own choice. She lived in a world where the lengthening shadows of sorrow and death darkened her personal horison. "I can't stop to strut - in a world where bells toll", she wrote in one of her letters.[13] "Sorrow seems more general than it did," she wrote again, "and not the estate of a few persons, since the war began".[14] As a defence against a chaotic and hostile world, she found the community of the one - the poet in the act of creation. With clinical detachment she explored the subterranean secrets of her soul and projected her self to confront the non-self wherein resided the experience she required. This confrontation of the Me by the Not-Me (Emerson's phrase) had terrors of its own.

> One need not be a Chamber-to be Haunted -
> One need not be a House -
> The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
> Material Place -
>
> Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
> External Ghost
> Than its interior Confronting
> The Cooler Host.
>
> Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
> The Stones a'chase -
> Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter -
> In Lonesome Place

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13 Jay Leyda, Vol. II, p. 65.

14 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 72.

> Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
> Should startle most -
> Assasin hid in our Apartment
> Be Horror's least. Vol.II, 670

The encounter with the self in her lonesome soul and the meeting of herself behind herself, gave her the opportunity to make a perpetual assessment of her experience and shaped her unique poetic mode.

She was also aware of the duality of the self. The seat of the self is the consciousness and one of the primary functions of the consciousness is to bring or forge unity between the self and the non-self or, in Emerson's phrase, the me and the not-me. But there was division within the self itself: the part of the self which is involved in the experience, is watched by the other part of the self which is not involved and which functions as an onlooker or a spectator not sharing the experience. It is like the 'you and I' of Eliot's Prufrock, or as the other part of the self in Whitman's 'Song of Myself' (Section 4):

> Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
> Stands amused,complacement,compassionating, idle, unitary,
> . . . . . .

Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it. For a poet like Emily Dickinson who was committed to self-revelation in her poetry, this duality of the self assumes greater prominence. In her poem (Vol.II, 670, quoted above) she states

that it is easier to meet an external ghost at midnight than to confront the cool and composed 'host' of the 'interior'. This cool host stands aside as witness and as a recorder of experience but such a host also plays the most important role in the creative activity of the poet by modifying the subjective or 'subjunctive' and often transmuting the subjective into the objective or 'indicative', (in modern terminology). In another poem, she, almost jokingly points out this duality:

> But since Myself - assault Me -
> How have I peace
> Except by subjugating
> Consciousness?
>
> And since We're mutual Monarch
> How this be
> Except by Abdication -
> Me - of Me? Vol. II, 642

Self-revelation, however, was not without a precedent in the intellectual history of America. Jonathan Edwards emphasised "personal narrative" as a guide to spiritual recovery and puritanism made introspection the most effective measure for self as well as social evaluation. As against Kantian epistemology, the Scottish Common Sense philosophy which dominated philosophical thought in America during the greater part of the nineteenth century, held that philosophy and introspection were identical. One of its leading exponents, Thomas Reid, insisted that a philosopher had to be an anatomist of

the mind - of the "corridors" of the "brain" in Emily Dickinsons terms - "for it is his own mind only that he can examine with any degree of accuracy and distinction."[15] Emily Dickinson wrote in one of her letters: "The soul must go by Death alone, so, it must by life, if it is a soul."[16] Again, she wrote in a poem:

> The Soul has Bandaged moments -
> When too appalled to stir -
> She feels some ghastly Fright come up
> And stop to look at her - Vol.II, 512

But in all her self-revelations, she remained majestically impersonal and even in the most crowded moments of a crisis, she took stock of herself as if she was some other person, "out with lanterns", as she said, "looking for myself"[17] or as she wrote nonchalently: "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -" (Vol.I, 465).

In an age which was overflowing with melifluous verse, and most poets were intent upon resolving verse to statement, she wrote aphoristic poems with "ommitted center" and in deliberate irregular syntax, which Higginson found "spasmodic" and "uncontrolled,"[18] although he recognized its "luminous flashes" and confessed that "you only enshroud yourself in this fiery mist and I cannot reach you, but only rejoice in the rare sparkles

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15 Selections from the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense, Ed. G.A.Johnston, (Chicago and London, 1915), p.13.

16 Letters, Vol. II, 321, p.455.

17 Ibid., Vol. II, 182, pp. 323-24.

18 Ibid., Vol. II, 265, p. 409.

of light."[19] She made sensuous patterns that word combinations can make and wielded her words like swords,[20] often surpassing even the imagists of the twentieth century in the fastidious choice of the precise and exact word.[21] She made startling innovations in the rhyme scheme and the use of meters she borrowed from English hymnology.[22] To the irregularities of her syntax she provided the notation to explain her poems by showing how they must be spoken.[23] She created striking images as when she described sunset as "Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple/Leaping like Leopards to the Sky." (Vol. I, 228). If there was a rebel poet, Emily Dickinson was most certainly one.

"Perhaps you smile at me", she wrote to Higginson, "I could not stop for that. My Business is Circumference".[24] Thus assuming the obvious and concentrating on the peripheral, she evoked the epiphany of self-revelation and made it one of the major devices of her poetry, for the ultimate meaning of poetry, like a circle or circumference, projects itself back upon itself. After suggesting

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19 Ibid., Vol. II, 330a, p.461.

20 Donald E. Thackrey, Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry (Lincoln, 1954), Chapter II.

21 See Chapter X. p 268

22 See Edith Perry Stamm, "Emily Dickinson: Poetry and Punctuation", Saturday Review of Literature, XLVI (March 30, 1963), pp. 26-27.

23 Letters, Vol. II, 268, p.412.

24 Jay Leyda, Vol. II, p. 65.

a metaphor to the Hollands, she wrote: "Perhaps you laugh at me. Perhaps the whole United States is laughing at me too. I cannot stop for that. My business is to love". Then employing a metaphor for herself as a poet, she continued, "I found a Bird, this morning ... and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody hears? ... "My business is to sing", and away she rose."[25] And she did sing like no one else in the nineteenth century America.

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25 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, see Chapter IV.

Chapter-II

WORDS

A poet's concern for precise and adequate language is natural enough, for words are the medium of his art. A poet has to grapple with words, in his own way and in every age, to establish their relevance to his art. The search for suitable and exact words gains greater urgency in the case of a poet to whom a worn-out poetic idiom has come as a heritage from his predecessors. Emily Dickinson found herself in such a predicament. The prevalent fashion in poetry had lost its meaningfulness, at least for her, and had become too trite to fulfill her need as a poet. Her chosen themes were also different and she had to forge a new and matching medium of poetic expression for the most acute moments of self-revelation. She had to go to the lexicon to make the discovery of the words she needed for her art. "For several years", she wrote, "my Lexicon - was my only companion",[1] a remark which Higginson thoroughly misunderstood and thought it to be an expression of her lonesome life, which certainly was not the intended meaning. Apart from the obvious fact that she made use of the lexicon

1 Letters, Vol. II, L. 261.

as the storehouse of the words she was looking for, this statement also implied that she learnt the art of writing poetry, not by instruction, but by her own method of trial and error, which was, consequently, more agonising and more full of anguish for the poet. She also found that her education was of no great help: "I went to school - but in your manner of the phrase - had no education."[2] The need for self-reeducation was all the more greater since, in rejecting Calvinistic theology, she had "sent her whole Calvinistic vocabulary into exile",[3] and she had to discover a new one to write her poems. "Easing my famine / At my Lexicon -" (Vol.II, 728) famine, indeed, it must have seemed to the young poet - a famine of new words for the experience of her solitary self clamouring for expression.

There is nothing unusual in this travail of poetic creation. In modern times Mr. T.S.Eliot has spoken about similar quest for words and their meaning.

> A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
> Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
> With words and meanings. ...[4]

Even after having spent a number of years to fashion the new tools for poetic expression, Mr. Eliot confessed:

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2 Ibid., L. 261.

3 Richard Wibur et al., Emily Dickinson: Three Views (Amherst, 1960), p.1.

4 "East Coker", Section II.

> So here I am, in the middle way, having had
> twenty years -
>
> Twenty years largely wasted, the years of
> l'entre deux guerres-
>
> Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
>
> Is a wholly new start, and a different kind
> of failure[5]

In the same section V,"East Coker", Mr. Eliot also speaks of the "raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment..." and finally concludes that "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business". Talking about the creative process of a poet Mr. Robert Frost has also spoken about the "reaching-out" for words. He writes:

> A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words. ...[6]

To reveal the inmost secrets of the self,according to Emily Dickinson,even the lexicon is not enough, and words provided by heaven, in moments of inspiration, are also the urgent need of the poet (Vol. I, 246). Lexicon and heaven both provide the instruments of knowledge as well as expression.

It was this basic need of Emily Dickinson which attracted

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5 Ibid., Section V.

6 Robert Frost's definition of poetry, printed on the dust-cover of West-Running Brook, (New York, 1929).

her attention to Higginson's, "Letter to a Young Contributor", published in the Atlantic Monthly, (April 1862), where he wrote:

> Human language may be polite and powerless in itself, uplifted with difficulty into expression by the high thoughts it utters, or it may in itself become so saturated with warm life and delicious association that every sentence shall palpitate and thrill with the mere fascination of the syllables ... Oftentimes a word shall speak what accumulated volumes have laboured in vain to utter: there may be years of crowded passion in a word, and half a life in a sentence.[7]

It was this "letter" which was a decisive factor in Emily Dickinson's choice of Higginson as her literary 'preceptor'. Here was a man who knew the power of words and their potentiality to encompass years of crowded passion which the poet had the eternal longing to express. Critics, including Professor Johnson,[8] have often wondered why Emily Dickinson turned to Higginson for becoming his "scholar" and why, again, she received his advice with deference without incorporating them in her poetry.

Why did she not approach Oliver Wendel Holmes who was known to be sympathetic to young poets and whose Poems had been given to her as a gift in 1849? There was Whittier in the

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7 Jay Leyda, Vol. II, pp. 51-52.
8 Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 106-107.

neighbourhood and could have been a very convenient adviser, particularly when he had gathered a group of women writers including Cecilia Thaxter, Sarah Orne Jewett and Lucy Larcom. There was Longfellow who was equally congenial and liked to patronize budding poets. Why did she not contact Emerson who addressed undergraduate literary society of Amherst College in 1855,[9] and who visited her brother Austin Dickinson "once even spending the night under her brother's roof,"[10] and about whom Mrs. Susan Austin Dickinson ("Sister Sue") had written with considerable admiration: "he turned his gentle, philosophic face toward me, waiting upon my commonplaces with such expectant, quiet gravity, that I became painfully conscious that I was I, and he was he, the great Emerson?"[11] There was some kind of kinship between him and her, for when her poem, "Success" was published anonymously in A Masque of Poets (1878), Emerson was generally believed to be its author. Emerson was known for his cordial, almost enthusiastic reception to the first edition of Whitman's Leaves of Grass and she could bank upon his sympathetic attention. There was Lowell who had encouraged Howells. Then there was Howells himself who reviewed her Poems in 1890, four years after her death, with keen insight and judgement.

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9 Jay Leyda, Vol. I, p. 412.

10 George Frisbie Whicher, This Was a Poet, (Michigan, 1957), p. 194.

11 Ibid., p. 197.

But Emily Dickinson ignored all these men most of whom were celebrities and considered to be first rank poets or critics or both. As against them, Higginson was the author only of a few mediocre poems, although he frequently contributed to the Atlantic Monthly and was popular as a lecturer. As a critic, he was in no way distinguished from other critics who were his contemporaries in matters of taste and judgment. Apparently, Emily Dickinson had not approached the celebrated New England worthies because she did not need sympathy or encouragement. She knew that she was different as a poet and what she really needed was "surgery", (her own phrase) a frank and straightforward criticism of her poems. Higginson epitomised the contemporary literary taste and had expressed a view about the power of words very similar to her own. Against his judgment she wanted to measure the vitality of the new poetic idiom which she had created and to test the extent and daring of her innovations both in theme and style.

II

Even a cursory reading of Emily Dickinson's poetry makes it obvious that words had a special fascination for her. She often discovered a word with childlike wonder and delight. Words like Tremendousness, Boundlessness, Immortality, etc.

excited her imagination and she commented on their immensity and imperishable significance. "Remembrance - mighty word", she once reflected after thanking a friend for remembering her.[12] This unusual interest sent her to search the root meaning of words, to their Latin origins, and used them in their remote meaning. She used the word 'adequately' to mean 'in exact proportion, 'stimulate' to mean 'animate', 'splendor' to mean 'shine', 'prudent' in the medieval religious meaning of 'prudens', capable of perceiving divine truth. These examples can be multiplied but they would serve my purpose here. Her keen sensitiveness to words determine, to some extent, her attitude towards the art of writing poetry, for she made sensuous patterns for which word combination gave her highly original and extensive scope. Though not entirely and always true, it is significant to note, as pointed out by Donald E. Thackrey, that her method of writing poetry was inductive: "through the combining of words to arrive at whatever conclusion the word pattern seemed to suggest, rather than using words as subordinate instruments in expressing a total conception.... manipulating them into brilliant patterns regardless of the direction of thought."[13]

Inevitably she exercised studious deliberation in the

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12 Mabel Loomis Todd (Ed.), Letters of Emily Dickinson, (Cleveland, 1951), p. 248.

13 Donald E. Thackeray, Emily Dickinson's Approach to Poetry. (Lincoln, 1954), p. 9.

choice of words, particularly when such words had a decisive bearing upon the total impression of the poem. "I hesitate which word to take", she wrote, "as I can take but few and each must be the chiefest."[13a] In a light mood, she has written a poem on the choice of words:

> Shall I take thee, the Poet said
> To the propounded word?
> Be stationed with the Candidates
> Till I have further tried -
>
> The Poet probed Philology
> And when about to ring
> For the suspended Candidate
> There came unsummoned in -
>
> That portion of the Vision
> The Word applied to fill
> Not unto nomination
> The Cherubim reveal - Vol.III, 1126

The vision of the poet which the word (suspended candidate) finally completes, comes in a flash and the ultimate choice of the word is not made till (unto) it is revealed by the poetic inspiration (Cherubim). Even so, such inspiration is preceded by a thorough search for words (candidates). In this attitude, Emily Dickinson contradicts Emerson who thought

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13a Jay Leyda, Vol. II, p. 412.

that the "ripeness of thought" easily found expression in "poems or songs."[14] She had a greater awareness of the travails of poetic composition than Emerson. That partly explains the existence of many incomplete poems which did not proceed beyond the rough draft and also the variant readings she noted down in her worksheets.

A very interesting example has been quoted by Mrs. Millicent Todd Bingham[15] to illustrate her choice of word. The lines quoted are from the concluding stanza of the poem "The Bible is an antique Volume" (Vol.III, 1544) and run as follows:

> Had but the tale a thrilling, typic
> hearty, bonnie, breathless, spacious,
> tropic, warbling, ardent, friendly, magic,
> pungent, winning,mellow teller
>
> All the boys would come -
> Orpheus's sermon captivated,
> It did not condemn.

Mrs. Bingham believed that Emily Dickinson was unable to choose out of the fourteen alternatives and took the credit of deciding to keep 'warbling'. Johnson has pointed out that warbling was selected by the poet herself in the fair copy of the poem.

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14 Ralph W. Emerson, "The Poet".

15 Millicent Todd Bingham, Ancestors' Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson, (New York, 1945), p. 314. See also Poems, Vol. III, pp. 1066-67.

Similarly, the worksheet of the poem, "Two Butterflies went out at Noon -" (Vol. II, 533) is a fascinating document of the poet's diligent probe of philology. A portion of the second stanza is produced below.

Gravitation chased
humbled -
ejected
foundered
grumbled

Until a Zephyr pushed them
chased -
flung -
spurned
scourged

And Both were wrecked in Noon
drowned
quenched
whelmed

And they were hurled from noon - Vol.II, p. 411

The Harvard Edition of her poems abounds with such examples and one of the great merits of this edition, apart from the restoration of the poems to their original form as they were written by the poet, is the reproduction of the worksheet, where possible, and the alternative lines or variant readings of the lines which the poet had written down for her final option, are given.

This uncommon concern for the choice of the right word was a consequence of her belief in the power of words. She lived in an age of orators and her own father had distinguished

himself in that field. The pulpit preachers also cultivated this art and often achieved renown, as did Charles Wadsworth whom she most probably heard preach in Philadelphia, for the brilliance of their pithy utterances. As against the flowing generalities of prevalent poetry, often punctuated with fluffy ambiguities, she wanted to write a kind of poetry which transmitted an immediate, overpowering vision and for that she needed words which had the sharpness of a sword:

> There is a word
> Which bears a sword
> Can pierce an armed man -
> It hurls its barbed syllables
> And is mute again - Vol. I, 8

Again, she expresses the same idea in another poem, changing the metaphor into a simile

> She dealt her pretty words like Blades,
> As glittering they shone,
> And every One unbared a Nerve
> Or wantoned with a Bone. Vol. I, 479

Obviously, she is not talking about a poet or about herself. According to late Professor Whicher's conjecture, the poem describes Sister Sue with whom an unaccountable estrangement had invisibly grown in the closing years of the poet's life.[16]

16 This was a Poet, p. 36.

But that is not our concern here. What is significant is the fact that, in her own life, she had the experience of words which cut like "blades", unbared a nerve and played with a bone, and she painfully realised the power of words.

She talks about the impact of the phrase, "I love you", in one of her poems, although she does not specify and leaves it, in her characteristic way, to the imagination of the reader.

> Many a phrase has the English language
> I have heard but one -
> Low as the laughter of the Cricket,
> Loud, as the Thunder's Tongue
> . . . . . .
> Breaking in bright Orthography
> On my simple sleep -
> Thundering it's Prospective -
> Till I stir, and weep - Vol.I, 276

Such a phrase has both the softness of tone and the resounding loudness of the thunder and the brightness of its words is capable of disturbing the uninvolved and innocent sleep. The reverberating distant view, evoked by these words, moves the human heart to tears "Not for the sorrow, done me - / But the push of Joy." (Vol. I, 276). Similarly, words may efface joy to a depth from which no recovery is possible.

The Treason of an accent
Might Ecstasy transfer -
Of her effacing Fathom
Is no Recoverer -

The Treason of an Accent
Might vilify the Joy -
To breathe - corrode the rapture
Of Sanctity to be. Vol.III, 1358

It may obliterate even the holiness (sanctity from the Latin sanctitas) of an ecstacy consecrated to a deity.

Emily Dickinson also warns against the concealed power of an innocuous remark, seemingly quiet and made casually but containing the hidden spark which may explode into a fire.

A Man may make a Remark -
In itself - a quiet thing
That may furnish the Fuse unto a Spark
In dormant nature - lain -

Let us divide - with skill -
Let us discourse - with care -
Powder exists in Charcoal -
Before it exists in Fire Vol. II, 952

The words are, therefore, to be separated and classified (divide) before they are used not only in writing but also even ordinary conversation has to be watched carefully.

Could mortal lip divine
The undeveloped Freight
Of a delivered syllable
'Twould crumble with the weight Vol.III, 1409

One can imagine how careful she must have been and how she must have weighed each word with its root meaning and connotation before using it in a poem. That also explains her horror at the editorial changes made in a few of her poems which were published during her life-time. When her poem, "The Snake", was printed in The Springfield Republican without her permission, she was furious with Sistor Sue and angrily commented in a letter to Higginson; "... it was robbed of me - defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one."[17] Perhaps, it also explains her persistent refusal to publish her poems in an age when the editors took undue liberty with the text.

III

In order to make her words effective, it was necessary to exercise the utmost economy in their use. Too many words diffuse the vision they embody or weaken the idea they carry. The orator can afford to play with words, employ embellishments,

17 Jay Leyda, Vol. II, p. 112.

embroider and decorate his ideas, for he had ample space and time. Not so the poet whose art is the art of concentration and of brevity. He does not talk in prose but in poetry. For a poet like Emily Dickinson who had decided to write a kind of aphoristic poetry with its "ommitted centre",[18] it was all the more necessary to practise austere economy of words. Apart from this artistic need, she was born and lived all her life in New England where frugality of speech and understatement are still common and inborn habits of speech. There are several jokes, still told with lot of mirth and enjoyment, about President Coolidge who spoke in monosyllables, seldom using two words, and never using two words where one was enough. She did not practise such economy in speech. She told extremely funny stories to her classmates, inventing them on the spot, during her brief stay at Holyoke Seminary. She wrote letters to her brother sparkling with banter and humorous turns of phrase. But with the passage of time, she became more careful and developed the habit of composing her letters like poems. Her last letter to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, consisted of two words: "Called back".[19] In one of her poems, she wrote:

> Tell Him the page I did'nt write -
> Tell Him - I only said the syntax -
> And left the Verb and the pronount out - Vol.I, 494

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18 Ibid., Vol.I, p. XXI ("Introduction").
19 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 470.

In writing a love letter, it was not the haste which caused her to ignore the rules of constructing a sentence. It is the laconic mode of her elliptical style which she cultivated and consistently practised in writing poetry. She celebrated this economy in an aphorism;

> Capacity to Terminate
> Is a Specific Grace - Vol.III, 1196

Indeed, it was this capacity which distinguishes her poetry from the verbosity of her contemporaries and brings it much closer to modern poetry.

She also believed that words have imperishable significance. They have a life of their own. They grow and develop and change through the ages and assume new shades of meaning and connotation but their significance remains perpetual. In a short poem, she comments on this aspect of the words.

> A word is dead, when it is said
> Some say -
> I say it just begins to live
> That day. Vol. III, 1212

The life of a word begins from the day it is made the vehicle of communication and through the passage of time when usage changes its orthography or even makes it obsolete, it continues to live in the literature of the antiquity and is still studied.

Words have, thus, recreative power which makes them immortal.

> A Word that breathes distinctly
> Has not the power to die
> Cohesive as the Spirit
> It may expire if He - Vol.III, 1651

Again, she comments on the timelessness of words:

> A little overflowing word
> That any, hearing, had inferred
> For Ardor or for Tears,
> Though Generations pass away,
> Tradition ripen and decay,
> As eloquent appears - Vol.III, 1467

The word 'eloquent' signifies vividness, that is, the word remains vivid and forceful and does not become a still ornament. In another poem, she jokingly speaks about the perpetual significance of the words in terms of 'infection' and 'malaria'. The words combined in patterns of poetic idiom, survive the poet, their maker.

> A word dropped careless on a Page
> May stimulate an eye
> When folded in perpetual seam
> The Wrinkled Maker lie
>
> Infection in the sentence breeds
> We may inhale Despair
> At distances of Centuries
> From the Malaria - Vol.III, 1261

There is a universal belief that inspiration is the generative force in composing poetry and in inspired moments, words come as copiously and abundantly as the water falling from a cataract. There are examples of Coleridge, Keats and Byron to whom poems came fully composed. Burns and Blake had similar experiences. Broadly speaking, it may be true but it is not, I think, the whole truth. Manuscripts of even great poets bear testimony to the fact that they worked assiduously in revising, improving and polishing the lines before they arrived at the final draft. In one of her letters to Higginson, she wrote: "You told me Mrs. Lowell was Mr. Lowell's "inspiration". What is inspiration?"[20] The pointed question does not deny the existence of inspiration, as it may seem. What it really signifies is the fact that what she understood from the word was different. Inspiration, according to her, was partly divine; it could not be associated with a human being. She also believed that inspiration came rarely, often following, and not preceding, the travails of composing a poem, helping to find ("nominate") the right word (Vol.III, 1126). Again, she wrote:

> Your thoughts don't have words every day
> They come a single time
> Like signal esoteric sips
> Of the communion Wine
> Which while you taste so native seems
> So easy so to be

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20 Ibid., Vol.II, p. 152.

You cannot comprehend its piece
Nor its infrequency. Vol.III, 1452

She compares the rare moments of inspiration, when thought finds the right words, to the sips of sacramental wine which is for the chosen few (esoteric), not exoteric, and which marks the initiation into the knowledge of the divine essence.

She was also aware of the inadequacy of language to express the intricacies of thought or the depth and intensity of emotions. She wrote to Samuel Bowles: "I can't thank you more - ... The old words are numb - and there a'nt any new ones -".[21] Again, she wrote, this time to Higginson: "I ... never try to lift the words which I cannot hold."[22] After the death of her father, she said in a letter that she could not express her grief in words - "it was too soon for language."[23] An emotion which can find facile expression in words is, perhaps, shallow or is an artificial and simulated one, for deep emotion leaves a person speechless.

If I could tell how glad I was
I should not be so glad -
But when I cannot make the Force
Nor mould it into Word
I know it is a sign
That new Dilemma be
From mathematics further off
Than from Eternity. Vol.III, 1668

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21 Letters, Vol. II, p. 395.
22 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 330.
23 Ibid., Vol.III, p. 713.

Since mathematics is the science of measuring quantities with the help of signs and symbols, its function is to solve perplexing problems (dilemma). But the perplexity of deep emotions defies communication and the signs and symbols of language are of no avail. Hence, 'mathematics' has been used here to mean language and emotion is equated with dilemma. In another poem she wrote: "Can Blaze be shown in Cochineal - / Or Noon - in Mazarin?" (Vol.II, 581).

Since perfect communication is unattainable through words, silence can often express more than words. "Speech is one symptom of Affection / And silence one -". (Vol.III, 1681). Emily Dickinson argues in one of her poems that "Omnipotence - had not a Tongue - / His lisp - is Lightning - and the Sun." (Vol.I, 420). In another poem, she jokingly expresses her fear of the silent man.

> I fear a Man of frugal Speech -
> I fear a Silent Man -
> Haranguer - I can overtake -
> Or Babbler - entertain -
>
> But He who weigheth - While the Rest -
> Expend their further pound -
> Of this Man - I am wary -
> I fear that He is Grand - Vol.II, 543

Because of the inadequacy of language, words diminish the beauty they describe and debase its fascination. Like the unfathomable sea which is "syllable-less", an effort to find its equivalent

in words, is sure to meet with failure. Beauty is like the joy of unspecified legacies or it is like the mines of thought which cannot be fully explored (Vol. III, 1700).

IV

Emily Dickinson believed in the recreative power of ideas and if such ideas found matching words in poetry, they would have an abiding significance approaching immortality. She considered uncreated ideas as the hidden Deity and the word as the manifest God. She, therefore, found in the bread and wine of the Holy Communion or Eucharist and St. John's doctrine of the word, powerful metaphors to express her belief. The Gospel of St. John and the Book of Revelation, her favourite reading in the Bible, provided her with the parallels which she used to describe the power and perpetual relevance of poetry. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." (St. John 1:1). Since no man had seen God, He could not be made manifest to men. He made the Son as the son of man and sent him to live among mankind, so that through him, the glory of God could be perceived by the limited human intellect. The advent of Christ in the light of St. John's meaning, was the incarnation of the Word. "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,)

full of grace and truth." (St. John 1:14). Christ's discourses, according to this argument, are his flesh and blood. The Word which was made flesh and blood in Christ, was further reincarnated in the consecrated bread and wine, and the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine brought knowledge of the divine essence.

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength -

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He -
"Made Flesh and dwelt among us"
Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology. Vol.III, 1651

Emily Dickinson has made use of St. John's doctrine of the word and Eucharist in the poem quoted above. "A Word made Flesh" is joined with the term "partook" of the Holy Communion signifying the incarnation of the Word as well as the Eucharistic ritual of sharing the bread and the wine as the reincarnation of the

word. Without going into minor theological details, she employs these two doctrines to express her faith in the imperishable significance of poetry. It is seldom, she says, when ideas are revealed in perfect words of poetry and equally rare when such poetry is tasted for the nourishment of our souls. But when such words do exist, they become immortal like the incarnated Word. Such a rare occasion, however, is made possible when words descend voluntarily through the consent of language or "This loved Philology." The poem, quoted above, is made obscure by the use of religious metaphors borrowed from two different but interrelated sources. It, however, gains in strength and depth of meaning once the significance of the religious metaphors is understood. She herself searched for its meaning as is evident from the transcript of one of the notes made by Susan Dickinson. "The import of that Paragraph "The Word made Flesh". Had he the faintest intimation Who broached it Yesterday! "Made Flesh and dwelt among us." "[24]

Again, she borrowed her metaphors from the Book of Revelation where St. John had made possible a spiritual interpretation of the Last Supper. As St. John was about to write the Book of Revelation, he was commanded by heaven to "Go and take the little book, which is open in the hand of the angel which standeth upon the sea and upon the earth." (Revelation 10:8). He went and as directed by the angel "I took the little book out

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24 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 912.

of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey." (Revelation 10:10). "And he said unto me, Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings." (Revelation 10:11). Eating of the book or Word gave nourishment and strength to the spirit of St. John to make the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Applying the borrowed figure of the apocalyptic vision of St. John, Emily Dickinson wrote in one of her poems on the theme of the Last Supper and extended it further to become the metaphor of the poet.

> He ate and drank the precious Words -
> His Spirit grew robust -
> He knew no more that he was poor,
> Nor that his frame was Dust -
>
> He danced along the dingy Days
> And this Bequest of Wings
> Was but a Book - What Liberty
> A loosened spirit brings - Vol. III, 1587

Like Christ who ate and drank the Word, reincarnated in bread and wine of the Last Supper, the spirit of the poet is nourished by words and he transcends the actualities of his miserable existence and also the fact that he is mortal. He is able to dance through his dismal life by the help of the wings bequeathed to him by poetry or words (book). The spirit of the poet is thus liberated by the words which he both eats and creates. The eating and drinking of the bread and wine in the Last Supper

and the Resurrection of Christ, are thus made into metaphors extending to the poet in his poetic creation.

In another poem she refers to a pagan tradition and refers indirectly to Hermes Trismegistus, Greek name for the Egyptian god Thoth, reputed founder of alchemy and other occult sciences. Thoth was identified with Hermes of the Greek mythology, who was the god of science and eloquence and who explained the universal principles governing the phenomena of nature. A mind which is "Hermetic", can provide strong stimulus to others who can journey through strange realms of thought, carrying the sealed wine like the water stored in a camel.

> Some Draughts of Their Refreshing Minds
> To drink - enables Mine
> Through Desert or the Wilderness
> As bore it Sealed Wine -
>
> To go elastic - Or as One
> The Camel's trait - attained -
> How powerful the Stimulus
> Of an Hermetic Mind - Vol. II, 711

Like the camel who can go long distances through the desert or wilderness by storing water within, the poet who has drunk the wine of words and preserves them in the vessel of a poem, can go into the realms of thought. It is a startling simile, indeed, to identify the poet with the camel but the point which

she wanted to make, comes vividly.

In her efforts to rejuvenate the poetic idiom bequeathed to her, she chose her similes and metaphors from various sources. She weighed every word etymologically before using it to convey her experience. In that respect, she anticipated the modern poetic usage. Her devices to make sensuous patterns by combination, substitution, juxtaposition and rearrangement of words was deliberate to achieve emphasis and surprise.[25] "How lovely are the wiles of Words", she wrote in one of her letters.[26] Her fascination for words was the primary concern of a poet who wanted to be boldly original not only in her thinking but also in forging a new idiom for poetic expression. This aspect of her poetic achievement has not been fully realized and commented upon. With the exploration of her poetry in greater details, the worth of her innovations in poetic technique, one hopes, would finally be given the importance they deserve.

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25 Some of these devices have been discussed, but not in relation to Emily Dickinson's poetry, by Margaret Schlauch, The Gift of Language (1955).

26 Letters, Vol. II, p. 612.

Chapter - III

CIRCUMFERENCE

Emily Dickinson wrote in one of her letters to Higginson: "Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that. My Business is Circumference."[1] This is the most cryptic statement about her theory of poetry and it has to be explored in all its ramifications before arriving at the possible meaning of the word "circumference". It is to be pointed out that in her poetry as well as in her letters, she often used words both in their religious and secular connotations. Indeed, there are poems where a word can be interpreted both ways, resulting not in the confusion but the enrichment of her meaning. Like the use of the symbols, this poetic device gives depth and dimension to her writings and her poems can be understood and appreciated on more than one level of meaning. A possible interpretation of the statement quoted above, has been suggested by Jay Leyda. He writes:

> A major device of Emily Dickinson's writing ... was what might be called the "omitted center". The riddle, the circumstance too well known to be repeated

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1 Jay Leyda, Vol.II, p. 63.

> to the initiate, the deliberate skirting of the obvious - this was the means she used to increase the privacy of her communication. ... Many of her best poems ... screen their kernel from a superficial reading. She must have enjoyed arranging for the moment of revelation, when all falls into place. Once found, the center impresses itself on the mind and memory more than if bluntly stated. "Tell the truth but tell it slant."[2]

The significant implication of this interpretation is that the central subject of the poem, which was obvious to her and which is not always obvious to the reader, is often unspecified and is to be assumed by the reader. Her function as a poet was to concentrate on the peripheral - the circumference - or the ramification of the main subject in relation to the perception of her projected self.

In such a novel poetic device there are chances of being misunderstood or of not being understood at all. Eminent critics have stumbled on her poems[3] and serious students of her poetry know that there are quite a few of her poems in which her intended meaning cannot be fully realized or worked out. There is also the lurking danger that the explicator of her poems may be tempted to foist his own meaning by providing or assuming the

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2 Ibid., Vol. I, P. XXI, ("Introduction")

3 See the introduction in Emily Dickinson, Ed.Richard B. Sewall, where Ivor Winters' and John Crowe Ransom's misreading of her poems has been pointed out. There are many more examples in the explication of lesser critics.

incorrect clue to the omitted centre of a poem. She begins a poem:

> Many a phrase has the English language
> I have heard but one - Vol.I, 276

This one phrase is left to be guessed by the reader and unless he assumes that the phrase is "I love you", the entire poem would not yield the intended meaning. A better realized poem begins with the line: "After great pain, a formal feeling comes -" (Vol.I, 341). She does not specify the pain and we do not know whether the pain referred to is caused by loss of love or faith or death. The poem concentrates on the consequences of the stunning grief (pain) in which all sense of identity is lost and the acts of daily existence become the movements of a meaningless ceremony enacted in a trance. The poem, however, employs images of death: the formal service, the silent tread of the funeral procession and the lowering of the coffin in the grave. These images in the three related movements of the poem do not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the cause of pain is death. If death is assumed to be the centre of the poem, the circumference is the grief and its effects which the poem vividly evokes and it is this circumference which, she said, was her business as a poet.

Such examples can be multiplied, especially by her well-known poems.

The Soul selects her own Society -
Then - shuts the Door -
To her divine Majority -
Present no more -

Unmoved - she notes the Chariots-pausing -
At her low Gate -
Unmoved - an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat -

I've known her - from an ample nation -
Choose One -
Then - close the Valves of her attention -
Like Stone - Vol.I, 303

This poem is generally regarded as a love poem and the society that the soul selects in the opening line, is the companionship, it is assumed, of the one chosen from an ample nation of the third stanza. Once this deliberate choice is made, other suitors or claimants of considerable wealth and temporal power may come without being able to impress her, for she has closed the valves of her attention and is impregnable in so far as the affections of her heart are concerned. This interpretation is valid enough, even if the identity of the one is not revealed and the biographical inquiries do not help to make the discovery. But the fact remains that Emily Dickinson speaks of the choice of the soul in abstract terms. Her main concern as a poet is to analyse the singleminded devotion to that choice and the demands it makes on the individual self. Her concentration is

thus not on the centre but the circumference of the subject. May be she is talking of her dedication to poetry and the "one" is the community of the one - the poet in the act of creation. Once this dedication is made, the allurements of the mundane world, symbolised by "the Chariots" and "an Emperor", no longer interest or tempt her. Thus we see that by keeping the centre of the poem unspecified, she adds to the depth and dimension of the poem.

As it has been pointed out by Jay Leyda,[4] she carried this habit of omitting the centre in her letters and even in the literary and Biblical allusions she used in her letters or poems. When she quoted a line from Shakespeare in a letter to Susan Austin Dickinson:

"Doth forget that ever he heard the name of Death"

what she really intended and what was relevant to illustrate the outspokeness, most probably, of her sister Lavinia, were the unquoted preceding lines of Coriolanus' speech:

His heart's his mouth:
What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent.

Similarly, when she quoted from Othello:

"And very Sea-Mark of my utmost Sail"

she expected Otis Lord to know the significance and warmth of the unquoted line:

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4 Jay Leyda, Vol.I, p.XXII ("Introduction").

Here is my journey's end.

Similarly, she considered the phrase "An envious sliver" sufficient to evoke the scene of Ophelia's drowning. She played the same kind of oblique game with Biblical quotations, although they are more easily recognisable. Occasionally she mixed indirectly quotations from two different chapters of the Bible as she alluded to the Gospel of St. John and the Book of Revelation in one of her poems (Vol. III, 1651). Again, she used the novels of Charles Dickens as codes for friends: The Old Curiosity Shop for Samuel Bowles or David Copperfield for Mrs. Holland. In this way, to quote Jay Leyda, "She would even make mosaics of her oblique quotations, each jagged color fragment lightly contributing to her broad design."

II

By the use of the word "Circumference" in different contexts in her poetry and letters, it is evident that she did not use it consistently and can be interpreted in various ways. It is a recurring image in her thinking and in her theory of poetry. Another possible interpretation is that she considered the mind the centre and its consciousness was the circumference. It was through the consciousness that the mind explored the outer world and registered, if not entirely determined, its response to the external world of men and objects. This accounts for a large

number of her poems on nature which are genre portraits. The thunderstorm, the sunrise, the sunset, the moon, the birds, the spring, the winter, the flowers, the trees, the mountains, the butterfly, even the rat and the bat, figure in her poems, seen through the eye of the painter.[5] In this process of perception and description, the sense impression plays a major role and Emily Dickinson's watchful attention to the everchanging scene and her effort to realise the ineffable is remarkable in many ways. But even she feels, at times, that the elusive light in spring cannot be understood through "science"; it can only be felt:

> A Light exists in Spring
> Not present on the Year
> At any other period -
> When March is scarcely here
>
> A Color stands abroad
> On Solitary Fields
> That Science cannot overtake
> But Human Nature feels.
>
> It waits upon the Lawn,
> It shows the furthest Tree
> Upon the furthest Slope you know
> It almost speaks to you. Vol. II, 812

In this matter, at least, she was like the French symbolist poets who gave primacy to the sense impression and tried to

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5 See the chapter on "Nature" for examples.

express the ineffable.

Consciousness was also the seat of the self and the exploration of the self was one of the most infallible sources of knowledge. Emily Dickinson had an inborn tendency to introversion. Emerson's observation, though not entirely true,[6] that the Americans of his generation "were born with knives in their brain" and had natural inclination to self-dissection, was certainly applicable to Emily Dickinson. She not only observed and analysed the scenes and objects of the outer world, but also applied the same method, with greater depth and dimension, to anatomising her thoughts and affections. She romped in the fields and pastures like "The Horse that scents the living Grass" (Vol. III, 1535), to borrow her own simile, but she also searched the shades and limits of the barn. Captivity and freedom were both prisons to her: "Captivity is Consciousness -/ So's Liberty" (Vol. I, 384) and she discovered the absolutes within her own self.

> Growth of Man - like Growth of Nature -
> Gravitates within -
> Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it -
> But it stir - alone -
>
> Each - its difficult Ideal
> Must achieve - Itself -
> Through the solitary Prowess
> Of a Silent Life - Vol. II, 750

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6 Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet, (Harvard, 1966), pp. 94-95.

The belief that intellectual and spiritual growth as well as the artistic fulfillment gravitates within, also led her to the belief that awareness of the self brought both uniqueness and separateness of her identity as a poet and as a person. The self, she concluded, was all in all.

> She knows herself an incense small -
> Yet small - she sighs - if All - is All -
> How larger - be? Vol. I, 284

She was determined to remain what she was and refused to lose her identity, even when she knew that she was small. Employing another metaphor of multiple meaning, she thought of herself as a "brook" and declined the invitation of the sea to come and be absorbed. If the self contained all, was all, it must also displace all, to remain what it was and wanted to be.

> The Sea said "Come" to the Brook -
> The Brook said "Let me grow" -
> The Sea said "Then you will be a Sea" -
> I want a Brook - Come now"!
>
> The Sea said "Go" to the Sea -
> The Sea said "I am he
> You cherished" - "Learned Waters -
> Wisdom is stale - to Me." Vol. III, 1210

The brook has the potentiality of growth and is likely to grow into a sea. As such, the sea addresses the brook as the sea

in the second stanza, implying the argument that the sea does not join the sea; only the brook can and does join the sea and it is the brook which cherishes to meet the sea. There is both truth and wisdom in the argument but they are stale to the brook, for the brook would lose its individuality and its identity after joining the sea.

Emily Dickinson has often used geographical images for the exploration of the self.[7] But she was also aware of the immensity of the consciousness or the "circumference" and used metaphors to indicate its vastness where she could hardly find any recognizable signs to mark its perimeter. She talks metaphorically about the vast praries:

> Unbroken by a Settler -
> Were all that I could see -
> Infinitude - Had'st Thou no Face
> That I might look on Thee ? Vol. II, 564

She compared her heart, before it achieved the dimensions of the expansive consciousness, to a "little Bank" as against the seemingly limitless stretch of the sea. Employing the metaphor of the bird for the self, she describes how hesitatingly it rises, gaining an arc.

> And now among Circumference -
> Her steady Boat be seen -
> At home - among the Billows - As
> The Bough where she was born. Vol. II, 798

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7 See Poems, Vol.II, 516, 631, 655, Vol.III, 935 and Letters, Vol.III, L. 715.

Varying the metaphor, she claims in another poem: "Existence's whole Arc, filled up, / With one small Diadem". (Vol.II, 508) Equating the consciousness to "the Brain" or mind, she asserts that while the self is assailed with sense impressions,

> The Brain - is wider than the Sky -
> For - put them side by side -
> The one the other will contain
> With ease - and You - beside - Vol. II, 632

She also used the word "circumference" for the expanse of time and, perhaps, thought of the finite self as a tiny speck confronting the infinitude of Eternity. It has often been observed in the theological doctrines of Christianity and Islam that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite. Emily Dickinson's basic motive as a poet, was to comprehend and she projected her consciousness like a circumference of which the pointed centre was the self, and it was through this projection that she hoped to establish the vital relationship between "me" and "not me", to feel intensely and to gain knowledge necessary for the confrontation of the self with ecstasy as well as pain. But she was often afraid of losing her finity

> Time feels so vast that were it not
> For an Eternity -
> I fear me this Circumference
> Engross my Finity. Vol. II, 802

Paradoxically enough, she also felt that

Pain - expands the Time -
Ages coil within
The minute Circumference
Of a single Brain - Vol. II, 967

There is an apparent inconsistency when she talks of the "minute" circumference of a single brain as compared to the claim that the brain is wider than the sky (Vol.II, 632, quoted above). The circumference of the single brain becomes small in a twofold sense; pain expands time to the extent that ages coil within and in this bleak expanse of time, the circumference of the mind seems insignificant; secondly, pain forces the consciousness to centre round the physical entity of the individual and the self is thus circumscribed and unable to project itself into the circumference of which the acute and sensitive centre is the self. In this respect it merits comparison with the conclusion of the chapter "The Centre of Many Circumsferences" in Melville's novel, Mardi:

> And here, in this impenetrable retreat, centrally slumbered the universe-rounded, zodiac-belted, horizon-zoned, sea-girt, reef-shashed, mountain-locked, arbour-nested, royalty-girdled, arm-clasped, self-hugged, indivisible Donjalolo, absolute monarch of Juam:- the husk-inhusked meat in a nut; the innermost spark in a ruby; the juice-nested seed in a golden-rinded orange; the red royal stone in an effeminate peach; the insphered sphere of spheres.[8]

Emily Dickinson also believed that the outer circumference

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8 Herman Melville, Mardi, (Signet Classics ed., 1964), Chapter 79, p. 206.

derived its magnitude from the inner self which was the axis which regulated "the Wheel".(Vol. I, 451).

III

Emily Dickinson also made the circumference the metaphor for divine glory, manifested by the cosmos, as well as for the divine ecstacy experienced by the individual through the comprehension of the revealed divinity. Jonathan Edwards, the most sophisticated and articulate theologian of the eighteenth century America, argued that as the universe of heavenly bodies moved in a framework of wheels within wheels, so did God's providence. Further, as the different wheels of a watch move in contrary directions, the intricate design of the watch serves the purpose of the craftsman to show time, so the spiritual life of God's creation has a central purpose. "There is a progress towards a certain fixed issue of things", he wrote, "and every revolution brings nearer to that issue, as it is in the motion of a wheel upon the earth or in the motion of the wheels of a chariot, and not like the motion of a wheel on its axis, for if so, its motion would be vain."[9] Emily Dickinson agreed with this fundamental principle of Jonathan Edwards, even when she often disapproved and flouted

9 Jonathan Edwards; Images or Shadows of Divine Things, pp. 107-108.

most of his religious concepts, including his theory of the Elect: the chosen few elected to salvation. In one of her poems (Vol. III, 1510) she argued almost ironically that only the inanimate stone could fulfill the absolute decree. But she had identical view on the basic premise of the quotation given above and asserted that

> Each Life Converges to some Centre -
> Expressed - or still -
> Exists in every Human Nature
> A Goal - Vol. II, 680

What she meant by a "A Goal", was the centre of the outer circumference or the divine glory and that centre was most assuredly God.

St. Augustine, one of the great theologians of the early Christian Church, to whom Sir Thomas Browne was indebted for several ideas, and whom he called "the great Father", described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. Emily Dickinson's favourite author, Sir Thomas Browne, defined the divine circle or circumference in Religio Medici as a sense of boundlessness radiating out from a centre as against the normal sense of a limiting circle with defined and bounded enclosure. He cited the definition of Hermes: "The sphere of which the centre is everywhere, the circumference nowhere."[10] In the definitions of both Hermes

10 Sir Thomas Brown; Religio Medici Part I, Ed.James, (Cambridge, 1963), p.12, where Brown says: "That allegorical description of Hermes pleaseath me beyond all the metaphysical definitions of divines" (ll 7-8). See also p.102 for the original description of Hermes Trismegistus given in the commentary and notes.

and St. Augustine, apart from the similarity in the language, the emphasis is on the radiating motion which encompasses and extends to include something greater than the static circle can define. Emily Dickinson used the metaphor of the circumference for the divine glory in the dynamic as well as the static sense.

> And He and He in mighty List
> Unto this present, run,
> The larger Glory for the less
> A just sufficient Ring. Vol. II, 865

But, paradoxically, she also stated:

> When Bells stop ringing - Church - begins -
> The Positive - of Bells -
> When Cogs - stop - that's circumference-
> The Ultimate - of Wheels. Vol. II, 633

This is so, because the divine glory or circumference had the function of both extension and enclosure: it brought about the release of the self from the self and it also defined and determined the self, "For sheen must have a disc / To be a sun." (Vol. III, 1550). The radiating splendour (sheen) is the extension of the sun but it must remain a disc with its defined limits to be a sun.

In preceiving the divine circumference as well as in experiencing the ecstacy, the self has the awareness of its diminutiveness and expansiveness, in a manner similar to the sun.

I saw no Way - The Heavens were stiched -
I felt the Columns close -
The Earth reversed her Hemispheres -
I touched the Universe -

And back it slid - and I alone -
A Speck upon a Ball -
Went out upon Circumference -
Beyond the Dip of Bell - Vol. II, 378

Emily Dickinson defined heaven variously as the "House of Supposition", the "Acre of Perhaps", the "old Codicil of Doubt", "an ablative estate", and "uncertain certainty".[11] In a similar mood, she tries to explore heaven and finds no way as the heaven and its columns are closed. But in scanning the universe, she finds herself alone, finite and insignificant as a speck, and goes out to feel the divine splendour which extends beyond the slope of the earth and also, eternally, beyond time, into the infinitude. The ecstacy that the soul or self experiences, is, thus, "finite infinity".

There is a solitude of space
A solitude of sea
A solitude of death, but these
Society shall be
Compared with that profounder site
The polar privacy
A Soul admitted to itself -
Finite Infinity. Vol.III, 1695

11 See Poems, Vol.II, 696, 1012; Vol.III, 1741, 1411 and their discussion in the chapter on "Immortality".

The spectacle of the divine circumference, created in her a sense of awe. Even a starlit night could draw the response which was characteristic of her. She wrote in a letter to a person unknown to us: "Should you ask me my comprehension of a starlight Night, Awe were my only reply" (Vol. III, L.965). Again, she wrote to Sister Sue: "Awe is the first hand that is held to us ... Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness," (Vol. III, L. 871) and to Higginson: "I shall pick "May flowers" more furtively, and feel new awe of "Moonlight"." (Vol. III, L. 641). In one of her poems, she gave a fuller and more comprehensive response:

> "Heaven" has different Signs - to me -
> Sometimes, I think that Noon
> Is but a symbol of the Place -
> And when again, at Dawn,
>
> A mighty look runs round the World
> And settles in the Hills -
> An Awe if it should be like that
> Upon the Ignorance steals - Vol. II, 575

While Webster's New World Dictionary (1959) defines the word awe as a mixed feeling of reverence, fear and wonder, casued by something majestic, sublime, etc., one of the dictionaries of her day, [12] illustrated the meaning of the word by quotations

12 Dictionary of the English Language, Ed. James Hadley and revised by George Lyman Kittredge, (New Haven, 1847, 1864).

from Cowper, John Kebb, Macaulay and C.J.Smith. The quotation from Smith is worth repeating: "The solitude of the desert, or the loftiness of the mountain may fill the mind with awe - the sense of our own littleness in some greater presence or power." It was mostly in this sense that Emily Dickinson used the word in the letters and poems quoted above.

The meaning of awe as "terror or dread" is now obsolete but both the old and the new dictionaries use the word sublime. Presumably, Albert J. Gelpi had this meaning in mind while quoting from Kant's The Critique of Judgement a passage similar to the quotation from C.J. Smith referred to above. The quotation from Kant is as follows:

> Bold, overhanging, and as it were threatening, rocks; clouds piled up in the sky, moving with lightning flashes and thunder peals; volcanos in all their violence of destruction; hurricanes with their track of devastation; the boundless ocean in a stage of tumult; the lofty waterfall of a mighty river...[13]

Mr. Gelpi has also referred to Edmund Burk's "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful."[14] Admirable as these references are, he himself has admitted that Emily Dickinson, "quite certainly" had never read these authors. But, perhaps, she did read Emerson's essay "The Oversoul" in Essays: First Series, considering her

13 Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet, pp. 124-125.
14 Ibid., p. 125.

admiration for the elder poet, and she must have noted the passage:

> ... the emotion of the sublime ... is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing serge of the sea of life. Every distinct apprehension of this central commandment agitates men with awe and delight.[15]

The passage quoted above, however, merits comparison with Emily Dickinson's poem discussed in section II of this chapter (Vol.III, 1210) to know the difference between the attitudes of Emerson and Emily Dickinson. Attention may be drawn to two more passages in the same essay, "The Over-Soul", of Emerson:

> Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beautitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.[16]

and:

> Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity

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15 Ibid., quoted on p. 126

16 An Anthology of American Literature of the Nineteenth Century, Ed. Fisher et al., (Eurasia, 1965), p. 84.

> worships God, becomes God; yet forever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and searchable. It inspires awe and astonishment.[17]

Emerson's concept of the transparent eye which dissolves the me and not-me and his merger of man and God was totally unacceptable to Emily Dickinson. She insisted on maintaining her separate identity in response to the non-self and in relation to God. The concluding sentence of the second quotation is also modified. It was the divine circumference, radiating and encircling the divine glory, which inspired awe.

IV

We also do not find in her poetry rhapsodies and euphoric visions of Emerson. Her exploration of the self was not directed toward the achievement of moral or spiritual elevation; its main objective was to gain knowledge of the self, and through the response of her self to the cosmos, an understanding of the non-self, both in the limited and larger sense. She also knew that the circumference also served as perimeter which demarcated the boundary between man and God, for circumference was something

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17 Ibid., p. 94.

Whose Amptitude no end invades -
Whose Axis never comes. Vol.III, 1428

Crisis, towards which implacable forces move and retreat, is like hair which balances life or death and, often, it gives a shock to the hand of God which maintains the difference between eternity and the circumscribed life of man.

Let instant push
Or an Atom press
Or a Circle hesitate
In Circumference

It - may jolt the Hand
That adjusts the Hair
That secures Eternity
From presenting - Here - Vol. II, 889

Not to speak of divine circumference, even another man's mind is so inscrutable that a close "inquest" yields no knowledge of the impregnable other mind.

His mind of man, a secret makes
I meet him with a start
He carries a circumference
In which I have no part

Or even if I deem I do
He otherwise may know
Impregnable to inquest
However neighborly - Vol. III, 1663

Her poetry and her letters embody a mind which was basically rational. In moments of ecstacy or despair, it was the continuous flow of reason which came to her rescue and "Whose esoteric belt / Protects our sanity" (Vol. III, 1717). This sanity also consisted in knowing that the divine or human circumference was too fragile to give permanent or enduring light or guidance. In a poem, brutally naturalistic, she states:

> An ignorance a Sunset
> Confer upon the Eye -
> Of Territory - Colour -
> Circumference - Decay. Vol. II, 552

In another poem, she describes a butterfly which emerges from the cocoon, as a lady does from a door, on a summer afternoon and "To Nowhere - seemed to go / In purposeless Circumference", exploring the wide expanse of the world in sheer delight, where men made hay and the bee was busy collecting honey from flowers.

> Till Sundown crept - a steady Tide -
> And Men that made the Hay -
> And Afternoon - and Butterfly -
> Extinguished in the Sea - Vol. I, 354

The sea is the metaphor of darkness which the sunset confers upon the human eye and which drowns the spectacle radiating the divine circumference and marks its terminus. Like the

divine circumference, the circumference of the mind or the self has its serious limitations. It may project itself in order to comprehend but there are many facts of life and death which defy the probe and are impregnable. The mysteries of nature, God and death are incomprehensible and unknowable entities and any claim to know them is sheer presumption.[18] Death is "That lonesome Glory" (Vol. III, 1370) which even the wildest guess cannot fathom.

> Further than Guess can gallop
> Further than Riddle ride -
> Oh for a Disc to the Distance
> Between Ourselves and the Dead. Vol. II, 949

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes obvious that Emily Dickinson was aware of the perimeters of the divine as well as of the human circumference and the consequent limitations of the human knowledge which these boundaries implied. Even so, she believed that circumference was the reaching out of the human understanding from mortal limits to the absolute fulfillment of the divine circle. The limits were the conditions of the finite self but within these limits the consciousness operated to gain the knowledge, however imperfect, which was necessary for art and essential to the human situation - the need of the isolated self. Two years before her death, she wrote in one of her letters to Mrs. Holland, in 1884, about the

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18 See the chapters on "Nature" and "Death".

death anniversary of Dr. Holland and concluded the letter by a startling statement, made almost casually, "The Bible dealt with the Centre, not with the Circumference." (Vol.III,L.950). The statement is extraordinary in view of the fact that the Bible was one of the primary sources of her imagery.[19] Perhaps, what she meant was that the Bible was a rule book of conduct, insisting upon certain values. It also provided precepts and prophecies with its authoritative "I say unto you". It did not embody, for Emily Dickinson, the divine reality. The fountain head of all truth and all the absolutes was within the self and its circumference - the consciousness. "By intuition Mightiest Things / Assert themselves - and not by terms", she wrote in one of her poems (Vol. I, 420). In spite of its limitations, therefore, the circumference marked as well as represented the farthest perimeter of human experience - the finite circle pressing on the infinite circle beyond.

In one of her poems, she defined circumference in concrete terms.

> At Half past Three, a single Bird
> Unto a silent Sky
> Propounded but a singe term
> Of cautious melody.
>
> At Half past Four, Experiment
> Had subjugated test
> And lo, Her silver Principle
> Supplanted all the rest

19 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 151-53.

At Half past Seven, Element
Nor Implement, be seen -
And Place was where the Presence was
Circumference between. Vol.II, 1084

The first stanza refers to the cautious note of melody of a single bird, proclaiming the dawn on a summer morning. The first hesitant note was in the nature of an experiment which overcame the test to establish the silver principle of the proclamation and soon there was a chorus of songs. At sunrise, the birds fell silent and flew away and in between the place where the birds were and the song which denoted their presence, there was the circumference. The awareness and the perception of the song hovered between the Place and the Presence even after the song had ended. Again, she wrote in another poem:

Twixt Firmament above
And Firmament below
The Billows of Circumference Vol. III, 1343

signifying the cosmic void which displayed the divine glory with "God, for a Frontier" (Vol.II, 1090).

V

Emily Dickinson considered the circumference of the poet's self to be all important, for the totality of experience inheres

in it. The poet through the moments of ecstasy as well as of despair, is able to partake of reality which is the fountain-head of all art. Seeking release and relief from intense emotions of the felt experience, he endeavours to impose the rigour and design of artistic re-creation in moments of inspiration which come as a grace. The poet, thus, captures and expresses the reality which is perceived by the self. Truth distills through the agony of his travail and if he succeeds in revealing even a fragment of the total reality, he proportionately fulfills the need of the artistic creation. What really matters, then, is the ability of the poet to comprehend reality and to recreate it through the medium of artistic expression. Emily Dickinson, therefore, gave primacy to the poet's perception.

> I reckon - when I count at all -
> First - Poets - Then the Sun -
> Then Summer - Then the Heaven of God
> And then - the List is done -
>
> But, looking back - the First so seems
> To Comprehend the Whole -
> The Others look a needless Show -
> So I write - Poets - All - Vol. II, 569

Emily Dickinson had to take this count, for she had dedicated herself to poetry and she needed the assurance that her dedication was not only right but also necessary for the release

of the self from the agony of the self. "Some seek in Art - the Art of Peace -" (Vol. II, 544).

In this respect, she was in the main stream from Plato to Emerson.[20] The poet was a seer and as inspiration came transcending the regular channels, the poet, in a sense, was possessed, divining the truth in the experience and the experience in the truth. The poet, the experience and the medium of artistic experience were, thus, interrelated. It did not matter what kind of seer the poet was; what mattered was the transmission and articulation of the perceived reality.

> The pedigree of Honey
> Does not concern the Bee,
> Nor lineage of Ecstasy
> Delay the Butterfly
> On spangled journeys to the peak
> Of some perceiveless thing - Vol. III, 1627

This articulation was comparatively easy when it concerned the external reality but even in that limited sphere she felt the inadequacy of human perception and the incompetence of human articulation.[21]

It was much more difficult when the poet was face to face with the splendour of the divine glory. The poet in his creative activity, emulates God, the Creator, who is the

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20 Ibid., p. 148.

21 See the chapter on "Nature".

radiating centre of the divine circumference. The poet has also the circumference of the self, which radiates from and falls back upon the self as its centre. Emily Dickinson was aware of the qualitative difference between the two circumferences and made a pointed reference to them in one of her earlier poems.

Of Bronze - and Blaze
The North - Tonight -
So adequate - it forms -
So preconcerted with itself
So distant - to alarms -
An unconcern so sovreign
To Universe, or me -
Infects my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty -
Till I take vaster attitudes -
And strut upon my stem -
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
For Arrogance of them -

My Splendors, are Menagerie -
But their Completeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I, am long ago,
An Island in dishonored Grass -
Whom none but Daisies, know. Vol. I, 290

The poem has three interrelated movements. In the first movement, (lines 1-7) the poet describes the aurora borealis and makes it the metaphor of divine circumference. In the second

movement, (lines 8-13) she delineates its effects on the simple spirit of the poet. In the third movement, she talks metaphorically of her circumference as menagerie which would entertain people long after her death.

The poem merits closer analysis. The radiating splendour of aurora borealis has a magnificence sufficient unto itself (adequate). It has perfect composure and self-possession (preconcerted) as against the disconcerted self of the poet. It is beyond the reach of mundane fear or anxiety (alarms) and is supremely detached (unconcern so sovereign) from the world below or the poet. The grand spectacle creates in the poet a sense of presumptuous self-importance: it infects the naive spirit of the poet with the contamination (Taints) of majesty which is beyond human reach. The use of the words "infects" and "taints" is in mocking contempt of the contemporary romantics and transcendentalists who believed that the contemplation of divine beauty exalted the poet to a godlike power and supremacy. This contamination induces the poet to take attitudes vaster than he can reasonably take and makes him puffed up with arrogance (strut) in complete disregard of his limitations (stem) and also of the social and biological conditions (men and oxygen) of his being. The stem restricts and limits the flower on it. Hence, a flower can disregard the stem only in pride and presumption. As against the beauty of the divine circumference, the beauty created by the

poet in his poems, is lowly and humble like the caged animals of a travelling circus. But this menagerie would entertain people when the poet is dead long ago and lies in the grave (island) in the grass treated disrespectfully (dishonoured) and trampled upon by people. At such a future date, only the daisy growing by the side of her grave would be able to recognize her.

Emily Dickinson, thus, ridicules the romantic notion and yet maintains, at the same time, that her poems, however imperfect and incomplete (completeless), would be a source of delight to future generations. In asserting the prennial significance of a poet's creations, she harnessed another set of metaphors in a later poem.

> The Poets light but Lamps -
> Themselves - go out -
> The Wicks they stimulate -
> If vital Light
>
> Inheres as do the Suns -
> Each Age a Lense
> Disseminating their
> Circumference. Vol. II, 883

If the poet succeeds in capturing the vital light of his experience and is able to recreate it in his poems, his "lamps" would achieve immortality, though much less than that of the sun. Each succeeding age would disseminate the truth perceived

by the circumference of the poet and immortalized in his poems. A poet who fulfills all the requirements of artistic creation, would continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted according to the critical insight (lense) of each age. It was this assurance of the isolated self of the poet, an assurance tinged with sadness, which made her write the poignant lines:

> This is my letter to the World
> That never wrote to Me -
> The simple News that Nature told -
> With tender Majesty
>
> Her Message is committed
> To Hands I cannot see -
> For love of Her - Sweet - countrymen -
> Judge tenderly - of Me. Vol.I, 441

And it is not only her countrymen but also the people of different countries and races who are engrossed with her poetry.

Two years before her death, she wrote a letter in 1884 to Daniel Chester French whose statue of John Harvard was unveiled in front of University Hall in Cambridge. She congratulated the young sculptor, according to his daughter, Mrs. William Penn Cresson, and wrote:

> Dear Mr. French:-
>
> We learn with delight of the recent acquisition to your fame, and hasten to congratulate you on an honor so reverently won. Success is dust, but an aim touched with dew. God keep you fundamental![22]

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22 Quoted by Thomas H. Johnson in the notes on the manuscript of poem 1620 in Poems, Vol.III.

She concluded the letter by quoting her poem:

> Circumference thou Bride of Awe
> Possessing thou shalt be
> Possessed by every hallowed knight
> That dares to covet thee. Vol. III, 1620

Circumference or consciousness is the bride of the sublime and an artist (knight) who covets her, is able to possess her and is also possessed by her. The connotative theme of the poem is fulfillment - religious, aesthetic and sexual. Fame, as she said in her letter, was of no consequence (dust) and was transitory like dew. What was important was the integrity of the artist - his veracity in transmitting and articulating his vision - to remain fundamental. Lurking behind the metaphors of the poem, is, perhaps, a statement of her own predicament as a poet. In the circumference, encircled and enveloped by awe, she was the captive knight, both the bride and the bridegroom.

Chapter - IV

NATURE

Since the closing decade of the Eighteenth Century, nature has been one of the most recurrent themes of English and American poetry. The chief exponent of this subject, William Wordswoth, explored its utmost philosophical limits and in doing so, set a trap of convention for the succeeding generations of poets. From him down to the victorian poets in England and through them to Bryant and Emerson in America, every poet faithfully, and at times exasperatingly, echoed some of the notable aspects of his attitude. Wordsworth's pervading influence had so deeply penetrated the literary sensibility of his age that for a long time to come poets could not get out of the rut; indeed, it was almost impossible for them to break away from a tradition whose validity had achieved widespread acceptance. As a consequence they saw, very often without really seeing, unity in multiplicity and carried their aching hearts to the mountains and to the meadows, without perhaps experiencing the healing power of nature, which Wordsworth had once claimed so eloquently. Man, Nature and God were no longer separate entities and man's relation to

Nature and to God assumed a well defined pattern as he was merged with the universal Being which flowed through him, intermittently perhaps, but always felt reassuringly in the blood and felt along the heart.[1] Among the later romatics two distinguished poets, Byron and Shelley, had complained of the contagious dullness of Wordsworth's poetry but even they, in their inspired moments, gave memorable expression to the creed they had apparently disapproved and at times despised.[2] Thus in the preceeding century, nature as a subject for poetry had been utterly exhausted and had reached its dead end from which it could go no further and in the process, nature poetry had become a colossal monument of boredom.

Emily Dickinson must have been familiar with Wordsworth; she had certainly read Emerson with some interest, if not with the same enthusiasm as that of Whitman.[3] The bareness of her

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1 The allusion is to the lines in William Wordsworth's famous poem, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey":

> ... I have owed to them,
> In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;

2 Lord Byron's ridicule of Wordsworth is very well-known. Two notorious examples are English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, 11.237-242, and Don Juan, "Dedication", stanza IV. Shelley wrote an entire poem "Peter Bell the Third", satirising what he called the contagious dullness of Wordsworth's poetry.

3 Almost all of Emily Dickinson's biographers have referred to her interest in Emerson's Poems. To mention only a few, please see George Frisbie Whicher, This was a Poet, (Ann Arbor, 1957), p.89; Thomas H.Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography, (Harvard, 1960), p.72; Jay Leyda, The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson, Vol.I, (New Haven, 1960), p.164; Albert J. Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet, (Harvard, 1966), p.16, 60.

reference to Emerson in her letters does not justify the belief that she was inspired to write poetry by his eloquence but the claim does not seem to be entirely exaggerated. It is interesting to note that one of Emily Dickinson's poems "Success is Counted Sweetest" was attributed to Emerson on its first appearance in an anthology of anonymous poems.[4] She, however, rejected the romantic and trancendental doctrines central to Emerson's belief and in doing so, she also rejected his view of nature as a divine analogy. The spectacle of nature did not urge her to philosophize on her own or on human predicament and more than anything else it was for her a feast for the eye, which she hoped to recreate in her poetry. She was fascinated as an artist by the phenomena of nature, by the variety of its colour and sound and with her characteristic analytical mind, she explored the complex implications of her experience. In this as in various other respects, she anticipated the modern attitude which refuses to make any facile assignment of man in relation to the cosmos and views nature as something shorn of all sentimentality.[5] It would be wrong to believe, however, that Emily Dickinson did not occasionally slip into the prevalent convention of transcendentalism but more often than not, her conventional thinking was coloured by the whimsy of her thought and expression. In recording the

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4 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 170; Jay Leyda, Vol.II, p.307.

5 Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, (New York, 1960), p. 94.

tension between sensation and abstraction, she presented, what Professor Allen Tate called, "the perfect literary situation".[6] It was also an artistic situation in which the primary concern of the poet was the perception, even if with what she considered to be imperfect understanding, of the hidden meaning of the process of nature, and the harnessing of an adroit utterance to match her perception.

She, however, never claimed, like the transcendentalits, to have understood the deep mystery of the phenomena of nature.[7] Even though gifted with the acute power of observation and the intensely sensitive mind of a great artist, she did not succeed in entering the innermost sanctuary of nature. But this was not the individual failing of the poet but the inadequacy of human awareness itself. For her, nature and God were the two unknowable entities which were beyond the range of human comprehension. She wrote many poems to emphasize the inviolable mystery which none can understand. In one of her early poems, she speaks about the eager look on the landscapes which appeared to repress a secret clamouring to be revealed but the supplication of the summer and the prank of the winter snow cover the secret with a veil ("Tulle"). The "graspless manners" of nature mock at the effort to know what cannot be

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6 Charles Feidelson and Paul Brodtkorb, Ed., Interpretations of American Literature, (Oxford, New York, 1959), p.208.

7 Gelpi, Emily Dickinson, pp. 97-98; Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 83.

known. The eyes which had perceived the splendour of colour, "the impalable Array", surpassing the legendary pomp and grandeur of Cleopatra, and filling the heart with a brief spell of nature's sovereign authority, are cheated in the end. They feel "cheated" because they believed to be on the verge of knowing the secret. The eyes shut in death hoping that what they failed to know in this life, might be revealed, in a different way, in the life after death.

The fine-impalable Array
That swaggers on the eye
Like Cleopatra's Company
Repeated - in the sky -

The Moments of Dominion
That happen on the Soul
And leave it with a Discontent
Too exquisite - to tell -

The eager look-on Landscapes -
As if they just repressed
Some Secret - that was pushing
Like Chariots - in the Vest -

The Pleading of the Summer -
That other Prank - of Snow -
That Cushions Mystery with Tulle,
For fear the Squirrels - know

Their Graspless manners - mock us -
Until the Cheated Eye
Shuts arrogantly - in the Grave
Another way - to see - Vol.I, 627

What the poet seems to say indirectly, is that the procession of colours and brief moments of ecstacy in no way constitute the knowledge of nature's mysteries. The loneliness and the "undecaying cheer" of the purple in the east and in the north are only the signs of nature's inn and broad invitations of nature's hospitality to all to enjoy what the senses can partake. But the external loveliness of the forests and the hills are only the outer fringe of the tent which, like the travelling circus,[8] nature has installed and it would be a grave error to mistake the outside for the inside.

> We spy the Forests and the Hills
> The Tents to Nature's Show
> Mistake the Outside for the in
> And mention what we saw. Vol. II, 1097

Thus, those who pretend that they know the inside and talk about it, simply mislead others, for nature, in spite of our familiarity, remains a stranger.

> But nature is a stranger yet
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her haunted house,
> Nor simplified her ghost.
>
> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get. Vol.III, 1400

8 Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p.52, 83. The travelling circuses came periodically to Amhert during her girlhood. There are references to circus in her letters. See Letters, Vol. II,L.390, 412.

She had also said in one of her letters that nature is a "haunted house"[9] and the mystery of its ghost cannot be made understandable by giving it the tangible substance of the concrete. Again, she argues in another poem that nature is "sedate", at times, and "grand" on other occasions, but our observation should end there, as nature's practices extend to necromancy.

> To Necromancy and the Trades
> Remote to understand
> Behold our spacious Citizen
> Unto a juggler turned Vol. II, 1170

It is not in the literal sense that nature practices black magic, as the necromancer is replaced by the tricky but harmless juggler whose manipulations only mystify. The wit of the concluding two lines, particularly of the poets' characteristically frugal expression for nature as "spacious Citizen", softens the serious accusation of the first line.

Similar to the problem of perception, was the problem of articulation. Even what Emily Dickinson could perceive of the external nature, she was cramped by the limitations of her expression to delineate in words. Like Mr. T.S. Eliot,[10] who emerged on the poetic scene almost a century later, she also felt the inadequacy of words, not only in the formulation of

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9 Letters, Vol.II, L.459A, "Nature is a Haunted House - but Art - a House that tries to be haunted."

10 See T.S. Eliot's "East Coker", Section II.

philosophical abstractions but also even in the communication of what the senses perceived.

> "Nature" is what we see
> The Hill - the Afternoon -
> Squirrel - Eclipse - the Bumble bee -
> Nay - Nature is Heaven -
> Nature is what we hear -
> The Bobolink - the Sea -
> Thunder - the Cricket -
> Nay - Nature is Harmony -
> Nature is what we know -
> Yet have no art to say -
> So impotent Our wisdom is
> To her Simplicity. Vol. II, 668

Nature's ostensible simplicity and artlessness is deceptive and conceals the illusive complexity which we have neither the discerning wisdom nor the competence of art to describe.[11] In one of her earlier poems, she describes the progression of sunset but admits in the concluding stanza:

> These are the Visions baffled Guido
> Titian - never told -
> Domenichino dropped his pencil -
> Paralysed, with Gold. Vol. I, 291

Her failure to represent the scene was similar to the three Italian painters, Rene Guido, Titian and El Greco (Domenico),

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11 Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p.82, where he writes about "the inadequacy of the artist's mimetic powers".

for they were equally baffled by the illusive shades, and the resplendent gold of the sunset was so overwhelming that even Domenico would give up his effort in despair to reproduce it on the canvas. Again, she returns to the same idea in a poem where she describes the scene of a summer day and says that as compared to them even a celebrated Vandyke painting would appear so inferior, "mean".

> Bright Flowers slit a Calyx
> And soared upon a Stem
> Like Hindered Flags - Sweet hoisted -
> With Spices - in the Hem -
>
> It was more - I cannot mention -
> How mean - to those that see -
> Vandykes Delineation
> Of Nature's - Summer Day! Vol. II, 666

Again, she asserts that if one could reproduce "The Lingering - and the Stain" of the sunset on a summer day, his name would always be remembered, for it would certainly be a great achievement.

Emily Dickinson's departure from romanticism was thus complete. In rejecting the Emersonian assumption of merger of man, nature and God, she went a step further to ridicule the transcendentalists in one of her poems.

A little Madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King,
But God be with the Clown,-
Who ponders this tremendous scene -
This whole Experiment of Green -
As if it were his own! Vol. III, 1333

With the regeneration of nature in the spring, it is natural to feel and share the exuberance of the renewal of life. Indeed, it is wholesome even for a dignified King if his customary restraint is broken by the ecstacy, "madness", which the warmth and sunshine of the spring bring in their wake for living creatures. But to presume that the tremendous "Experiment of Green", ordained by God, is for man alone, would be clownish presumption.[12] Man is an insignificant speck in the enormous spectacle of nature and his limited separate identity does not entitle him to claim the entire scene as his own. He must realize his separateness as he must admit the complexity of natural phenomena whose inner significance he cannot totally understand.

By rejecting Emersonian tradition, Emily Dickinson set a difficult task for her as a poet. She could no longer indulge

12 In this view, she makes a departure from the Christian conception of nature as the visible manifestation of God and shies away from a positive commitment to the orthodox view.

in rambling generalization but had to pin down her perception as well as its delineation in the most precise words. She had to search for a vocabulary which could evoke the transient moods and the elusive truth. She had to cut down her observation to the bare minimum to keep the essence of her description intact. The objective reality existed irrespective of her or of anybody; her concern as a poet was to perceive and recreate that reality in her poetry. It was not only half to perceive and half to create;[13] it was to perceive fully and recreate faithfully in words. The measure of her success in this effort would determine the extent of her success as a poet or as an artist. She once wrote:

> The truth I do not dare to know
> I muffle with a jest.[14]

This is a characteristic understatement, for truth can very often be reached only through paradoxes and can be made clear only by "jest". Emily Dickinson did not "muffle" truth but helped it to crystalize by her wit. She thus needed the verbal

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13 The allusion is to the following lines in Wordsworth's "Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey":

> ... of all the mighty world
> Of eye, and ear, - both what they half create,
> And what perceive; ...

14 Quoted in Carl Bode, Ed., The Great Experiment in American Literature, (Heinemann, London, 1961),p. 73.

veracity and precision of the imagists and the wit of the metaphysicals to operate effectively as a poet, in fulfilment of her self assigned task as an artist. Here, again, she anticipated some of the notable attitudes of modern English and American poetry.[15] Is it any wonder, then, that the full extent of her merit as a poet was recognised only in the twentieth century?

II

After having stated Emily Dickinson's views on nature, it remains to be seen how she put into practice what she professed as a poet or as an artist. Since she had cut herself adrift from the long tradition of nature poetry bequeathed to her generation by Wordsworth, it may seem that she did not have much to write about. This is not so; on the contrary, she wrote more than five hundred poems on nature and there is hardly any of nature's creatures under the sun and within her physical reach, which escaped her attention. For obvious reasons, her major themes were the seasons and the elemental forces which signalled or brought about the change. While she had gone out on picnic parties in her girlhood, she gradually withdrew to her garden, house and finally to her room from where she observed the outer world.[16] From "an ample crack" in the window curtain, she saw the branch of the apple tree:

15 See Chapter X, "Emily Dickinson and Modern American Poetry".

16 For the description of her girlhood, see Whicher, This was a Poet, pp. 53-54.

Like a Venetian - waiting -
Accosts my open eye - Vol. I, 375

On this bough is seen the "Emeralds" of summer and the "Diamonds" of winter snow. The "ample crack" was also symbolic of her highly original and almost idiosyncratic angle of vision which lies at the root of all her observations. In one of her early poems, she introduces spring thus:

Baffled for just a day or two -
Embarrassed - not afraid -
Encounter in my garden
An unexpected Maid Vol. I, 17

The description of the hesitant, almost tentative approach of the spring season and the sudden blossoming forth of the leaves and flowers, delights in its precision as the metaphor surprises by its witty verisimlitude. Spring received ampler treatment in another poem in which each line gives separate characteristics of the spring season, not unlike one of Wallace Stevens's poems.[17]

An altered look about the hills -
A Tyrian light the village fills -
A wider sunrise in the morn -
A deeper twilight on the lawn -

17 The allusion is to Wallace Stevens's poem, "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together", which consists of twelve separate lines. As to the simple question what a pineapple looks like, Stevens gives twelve different and equally correct answers. The fact that there are so many correct answers shows that reality is not one scientific description, but that there are many realities shaped by the imagination of the poet.

A print of a vermillion foot -
A purple finger on the slope -
A flippant fly upon the pane -
A spider at his trade again -
An added strut in Chanticleer
A flower expected everywhere -
An axe shrill singing in the woods -
Fern odors on untravelled roads -
All this and more I cannot tell -
A furtive look you know as well -
And Nicodemus' Mystery
Receives its annual reply! Vol. I, 140

The diversified renewal of life is thus the reply given each year to Nicodemus's question which he asked Jesus as to how regeneration was possible.

The same theme is repeated in another poem where the valley, the hills and the trees are swept clean and are given, what in modern cliche is called, "face-lift", in honour of the visiting dignitory, the spring.

The tidy Breezes, with their Brooms -
Sweep vale - and hill - and tree!
Prithee, My pretty Housewives!
Who may expected be? Vol. I, 74

The neighbours do not know the answer but the woods knowingly exchange a smile.

And yet, how still the Landscape stands!
How nonchalant the Hedge!
As if the "Resurrection"
Were nothing very strange! Vol. I, 74

Resurrection, even if in the theological sense, would certainly be a miracle or wonder too great and exciting to be bypassed calmly or disinterestedly and the poet is quite rightly surprised at the stillness and the ostensible nonchalance of the scene. Again, she repeats the idea in her characteristically witty manner.

Spring is the Period
Express from God.
Among other seasons
Himself abide,

But during March and April
None stir abroad
Without a cordial interview
With God Vol. II, 844

The idea expressed here is likely to be mistaken for some variety of pantheism or transcendentalism if the concluding line of the first stanza is lost sight of.[18] In other seasons God

18 In Emerson's concept of Transcendentalism, the self was the "Unknown Centre" but he also envisaged "the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them", and the next step was to dissolve it all in the euphoric perfection of the "aboriginal Self on which universal reliance may be grounded."

abides by Himself and it is only the spring season which He especially ordains and manifestly comes down to reveal His glory all around with its profound impact on discerning eyes. The interview is "cordial", for at no time of the year, nature is so benevolent or reassuring to man. It brings "madness" which is wholesome even for a king! Another variant of the same theme is embodied in another poem.

A light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period -
When March is scarecely here

A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.

It waits upon the Lawn
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you. Vol. II, 812

The light that she speaks of is not the visionery gleam seen by the mystics. It is the light of the "wider sunrise" and "deeper twilight" which signify the approach of the spring season. It gives the intangible shade of colour to the expectant but baren fields which have not yet started humming with the activity of the spring. It is a colour which cannot be

perceived by scientific observation but can only be felt by those who have watched the change of season with loving care.[19] The presence of this new light, however, is unkistakble, as it communicates the arrival of the festive season in almost human language, commonly understood, marking the cordial interview with God about which she speaks earlier.

The spring and the summer seasons were the most stimulating for her and inspired a large number of her poems. She wrote five poems on the month of March alone. Even when winter lay bare all around her, she was comforted with the thought of summer. "It will be Summer-eventually", begins one of her poems, when ladies with parasols, gentlemen with canes and little girls with dolls, would come out in the open and form a variegated bouquet to give colour to the otherwise pallid landscape in which the village lies surrounded by the marble of snow.

> The Lilacs - bending many a year -
> Will sway with purple load -
> The Bees - will not despise the tune -
> Their Forefathers - have hummed - Vol. I, 342

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19 The idea is presumably borrowed from Locke's distinction between the primary qualities of objects, which are absolute in the sense that they exist whether perceived or not (such as bulk, extension, and motion), and their secondary qualities, which depend on the perceiver for their existence (such as taste and colour).

With the advent of summer, she is pleased as well as amused by the variety of the multitudinous creatures who appear along with it. In one of her poems, she describes them, not without giving humorous attributes which distinguish them from each other. There are, for example, the "Baronial Bees - march - one by one -/ In murmuring platoon!" Thus the rainbow, the peacock, the butterflies, the robins, the orchis flowers and the bees constitute the strange armies of summer but the most impressive are the woods and the hills.

> Without Commander! Countless! Still!
> The Regiments of Wood and Hill
> In bright detachment stand!
> Behold! whose multitudes are these?
> The children of whose turbaned seas -
> Or what Circassian Land? Vol. I, 64

It is difficult to visualize a turbaned sea, except perhaps in the sense that a rough sea with the heaving surge may appear turbaned. But what Emily Dickinson seems to emphasize is the strangeness of "the children" and their ancestors. Circassia has similarly been used for the same purpose, denoting the mystery of a distant land.[20]

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20 According to the lexicon of her day, Circassian was the name of the inhabitants of a region northwest of the Caucasus, known as Circassia (now Kuban). They were finally subjugated, after a long struggle, by the Russians in 1864, after which many thousands migrated to Turkish territory. They were notable for beauty of form and feature. Circassian fathers used to sell their daughters to Turkish merchants for Turkish harems.

Summer in New England is inescapably associated with rain which washes away the putrid stagnation of winter and hastens the process of regeneration in nature. The snow is swept clean, the dead grass sends animated sprouts and the trees sway with expected loads of foliage, flowers and fruits. Rain in summer is thus symbolic of the joy of creation and fruitfulness. Emily Dickinson noticed the rejoicing in the elements with the advent of rain. In one of her poems, "A Drop fell on the Apple Tree", she catches the mood of the summer showers.

> The Dust replaced, in Hoisted Roads -
> The Sunshine threw his Hat away -
> The Bushes - spangles flung-
>
> The Breezes brought dejected Lutes -
> And bathed them in the Glee -
> The Orient showed a single Flag,
> And signed the Fete away - Vol. II, 794

The outdoor scene in this poem is crowded with gay festivity which comes to an appropriate end with the flag of the rainbow appearing in the rain-wet sky.

The rain is often accompanied by the pleasant breeze of summer. It is "a fashionless Delight" (Vol. I, 297) as it moves across, swaying the trees, sometimes bringing the scent of the woods to sell it at "a gentle price" (Vol. II, 602). Sometimes it comes to tap at the door like a tired man.

A Rapid - footless Guest -
To offer whom a Chair
Were as impossible as hand
A sofa to the Air - Vol. I, 316

But there are occasions when it comes blowing sand, pebbles, boys-hats and "an occasional Steeple"with a hoarse cry, "Get out of the way, I say". At such a time, the poet muses, who would be the fool to stay (Vol. I, 316).

The wind is not always gentle; it often comes on the wings of tumultous thunderstorms. In about fifteen poems of remarkable descriptive beauty, Emily Dickinson reproduces the terrifying spectacle of ruthless ferocity. These poems again deviate from the benign nature of Emersonian tradition. Her predecessors conveniently ignored the destructiveness of the natural phenomena and even when they did notice it, it was more or less with tacit approval, for nature could not construct without first destroying what was tainted or rotten. Emerson covered it further by having recourse to Hindu mythology - the Brahma, one of whose attributes was destruction.[21] That attitude, however, was on much higher, sophisticated and philosophical level. Nature, on the ostensible level, remained a benevolent manifestation of a Being which watched the human

21 The allusion is to Emerson's poem "Brahma". The title, in fact, should have been "Brahmand", the name for the trinity of the creator, the preserver and the destroyer (Brahma, Vishnue and Shiva), according to Vedantic philosophy.

drama with infinite sympathy, ready to guide man through the tangled web of his physical and ethical existence. Emily Dickinson cleared the cobwebs of this confused pathetic fallacy. She saw man pitted against the terrifying brutal forces occasionally let loose by nature, forces which in the blindness of their fury did not recognize the sanctity of man's existence or his manifold interest.[22] It was quite appropriate that she saw a thunderstorm as a monster chuckling over the roof-tops, whistling in the air, shaking his fists, gnashing his teeth and swinging his frenzied hair. The memory of the monster still dominates as the storm blows over.

> The morning lit - the Birds arose -
> The Monster's faded eyes
> Turned slowly to his native coast -
> And peace - was paradise! Vol. I, 198

In another poem, catching the sound of the shrieking wind, she compares it to the piercing sound of a bugle, perhaps to Gabriel's trumpet. As the windows and doors are barred against the storm, the "Emerald Ghost"

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22 See Cotton Mather, The Christian Philosopher in Selections from Cotton Mather, Ed. K.B. Murdock, (Harvard, 1926) where Mather maintains that God's benevolence is manifest in nature and apparent to man through reason. Emily Dickinson was directly opposed to the orthodox view and saw man confronted with implacable and hostile forces in nature.

The Doom's electric Moccasin
That very instant passed -
On a strange Mob of panting Trees Vol.III, 1593

Again, the storm is presented as a pack of howling, hungry dogs deprived of a bone, and it leaves in its trail the trees with "their mangled limbs / Like animals in pain". (Vol.III, 1694). In another poem she gives a fanciful description of the clouds as giants putting their backs together to start the gigantic push and "The Forests galloped till they fell". In such reign of terror, the poet concludes, "How good to be in Tombs / Where Nature's Tempest cannot reach" (Vol.II, 1172).

There are two poems in the group which stand out for their precision and for the evocative chronological sequence of the description. In poems discussed so far, the poet was concerned only with the human scene, in fact, the reaction of the poet to the chaos and turmoil of the storm. In "The wind begun to rock the Grass", the scene is more inclusive and extends to the predicament of the birds and cattle as well.

The Wind begun to rock the Grass
With threatening Tunes and low -
He threw a Menace at the Earth -
A Menace at the Sky.

The Leaves unhooked themselves from Trees -
And started all abroad
The Dust did scoop itself like Hands
And threw away the Road.

The Wagons quickened on the Streets
The Thunder hurried slow -
The Lightning showed a Yellow Beak
And then a livid Claw.

The Birds put up the Bars to Nests -
The Cattle fled to Barns -
There came one drop of Giant Rain
And then as if the Hands

That held the Dams had parted hold
The Waters Wrecked the Sky,
But overlooked my Father's House
Just quartering a Tree - Vol. II, 824

The poet does not devote separate stanzas to describe the effect of the storm on the earth or the sky as has been done in Shelley's famous "Ode to the West Wind". In her scheme of perception, such divisions would amount to artificiality and disturb the accurate sequence and rapidity of the storm. Except for the second stanza which is devoted entirely to the scene on earth, each stanza mixes the spectable on the earth and the sky or the human and the natural. This method gives the poem the amazing speed and its correspondence with the maniac onrush of the thunderstorm. The verbal precision entitles the poem to be included in an anthology of imagist poetry.[23] The concluding two lines are intended as an anticlimax

23 See Chapter X, "Emily Dickinson and Modern American Poetry", for elucidation of this remark.

to the apparently all pervasive menace of the storm which misses many targets. To read in these lines an evidence of the providential watchfulness, would not only be farfetched but would also ignore its irony.

The fury and the threatening spectacle of a thunder-storm is compressed into another poem of only eight lines. The brevity and the restrained description, however, catches the intensity of the outer scene even when mention of wind, cloud, thunder, lightening or rain is scrupulously avoided. The encircling chaos and darkness, seen through the window, resemble the eclipse of the doomsday inspiring awe in the onlooker.

> It sounded as if the Streets were running
> And then - the Streets stood still -
> Eclipse - was all we could see at the Window
> And Awe - was all we could feel.
>
> By and by - the boldest stole out of his Covert
> To see if Time was there -
> Nature was in an Opal Apron
> Mixing fresher Air. Vol.II, 1397

At doomsday, time must come to a stop and the stealing out of shelter to see if time existed, expressed the need of reassurance that it was only a storm that had blown over and that Nature was once again out in her startling colours

and fresh air.[24]

The storm was apparently so indeliably impressed on her imagination that she used it as a metaphor in one of her poems to express the soul's storm. There was, however, a fundamental difference between the two storms: the one passed after a brief spell but the other remained to strike her, to burn her and to blister her dreams. The comparison gives her the chance of displaying her wit.

> I thought that Storm - was brief -
> The Maddest - quickest by -
> But Nature lost the Date of This -
> And left it in the Sky — Vol. I, 362

In a similar witty manner she describes the lightening in another poem. The unexpected comparison of lightening with "awful cutlery" is a typical metaphysical conceit.

> The Lightening is a yellow Fork
> From Tables in the sky
> By inadvertent fingers dropt
> The awful Cutlery — Vol.II, 1173

Summer is followed by autumn, a season which has evoked

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24 Presumably this is a submerged reference to Noah peering out of his Ark, after storm and flood have subsided, to see if the face of God is still in eclipse or if time, in the sense of a new dispensation, has begun again. See also Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 141.

varying responses. Keats saw it as the season of mellow fruitfulness, having a special charm of its own.[25] This attitude was echoed by the American romantic poet Bryant who was fascinated by the colour of gold all around in this season.[26] James Thomson, the Scotish poet, saw it as a season of harvest as did Keats. Emily Dickinson also admired the bright colours ushered in by the autumn season, just as she noticed the ripening of the fruits. Most of her poems on autumn are splashed with bright colours and seem to be the creation of a poet who has looked on the scene with the eyes of a painter.

> The name - of its - is "Autumn" -
> The hue - of it - is Blood -
> An Artery - upon the Hill -
> A Vein - along the Road -
>
> Great Globules - in the Alleys -
> And Oh, the Shower of Stain -
> When Winds - upset the Basin -
> And spill the Scarlet Rain -
>
> It sprinkles Bonnets - far below -
> It gathers ruddy Pools -
> Then - eddies like a Rose - away -
> Upon Vermillion Wheels - Vol. II, 656

The dominant colour is red and its shades are emphasized by the

25 The allusion is to Keats's "Ode to Autumn".

26 W.C. Bryants poem "The Fringed Gentian" emphasizes the colour of autumn.

words blood, artery, scarlet, ruddy, rose and vermillion. Purple is suggested by the word vein and the variegated colours by the phrase "the shower of stain" and also perhaps by circular clusters of fallen leaves (globules) on the path of the garden. Apart from its artistic implications, the poem is a very precise and realistic description of New England autumn, where people still go on long rides to see the replendent countryside during this season. Emily Dickinson also noticed the ripening of nuts and fruits and in one of her early poems she described this aspect of autumn without mentioning the word autumn and leaving it to the reader to spot the season himself.

> The morns are meeker than they were
> The nuts are getting brown
> The berry's cheek is plumper -
> The Rose is out of town
>
> The Maple wears a gayer scarf -
> The field a scarlet gown -
> Lest I sh'd be old fashioned
> I'll put a trinket on. Vol. I, 12.

The mood of the poem is of cheerfulness, generally not associated with autumn.[27] The "gayer scarf" of the maple tree suggests the bright colours of the leaves and the entire landscape wears a scarlet gown. The poet urges herself to put on

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27 Traditionally autumn season is associated with sadness and decay in English poetry, as in Shelley, Keats and Tennyson, to mention only a few poets.

a trinket to achieve conformity with the surroundings.

The autumn season, however, is also a season of bareness, of persistent mists and of inconveniently cold winds.[27A] In one of her poems she refers to Bryant and Thomson with an indirect suggestion that what they saw in autumn was only half the picture. The other half was of an autumn which stopped the brooks, sealed the fragrant flowers and closed the eyes of the elves and fairies of the summer season in sleep.

Besides the Autumn poets sing
A few prosaic days
A little this side of snow
And that side of the Haze -

A few incisive Mornings -
A few Ascetic Eves -
Gone - Mr.Bryant's "Golden Rod" -
And Mr. Thomson's "sheaves".

Still is the bustle in the Brook -
Sealed are the spicy valves -
Mesmeric fingers softly touch
The Eyes of many Elves -

Perhaps a squirrel may remain -
My sentiments to share -
Grant me, Oh Lord, a sunny mind -
Thy windy will to bear. Vol. I, 131

27A In one of her letters to her brother, she described the autumn country side. "The earth looks like some-poor old lady who by dint of pains has bloomed e'en till now, yet in a forgetful moment a few silver hairs from out her cap come stealing, and she tucks them back so hastily and thinks nobody sees." Letters, Vol. I, L. 58, p. 149.

The mock-seriousness of the concluding stanza, does not completely conceal the lurking fear of the days ahead which can be endured cheerfully only if God grants a "sunny mind".

After the onset of the frosts in late autumn, there is a period of warm weather known as the Indian Summer[28] which is marked by a certain amount of serenity enveloping the bogusness of a deceptive summer. Emily Dickinson wrote several poems on this subject as well, emphasizing the illusive nature of Indian summer which can be very misleading, at times. In one of her poems she describes the daisy which, assured by the south wind, steps forward pouring soft refrain and lands:

> Into the lap of Adamant -
> And spices - and the Dew -
> That stiffens quietly to Quartz -
> Upon the Amber Shoe - Vol. I, 337

In another poem she speaks of this phenomenon of nature as a recollection of summer in which the humming bees and blossoms appear plausible but unreal (Vol. I, 302). The best realised poem on this subject, however, sums up the entire gamut of the outdoor scene. The poem is remarkable for the economy of the touches with which Emily Dickinson paints the landscape with characteristic restraint.

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28 See H.L. Mencken, American Language Supplement I, pp.181-184. Indian summer is a period of mild, warm, hazy weather following the first frosts of late Autumn, especially on the North American continent.

These are the days when Birds come back -
A very few - a Bird or two -
To take a backward look.

These are the days when skies resume
The old - old sophistries of June -
A blue and gold mistake.

Oh fraud that cannot cheat the Bee -
Almost thy plausibility
Induces my belief.

Till ranks of seeds their witness bear -
And softly thro' the altered air
Hurries a timid leaf.

The sacrament of summer days,
Oh last Communion in the Haze -
Permit a child to join.

Thy sacred emblems to partake -
Thy consecrated bread to take
And thine immortal wine! Vol. I, 132

It may be pointed out that the poet violates some scientific truths.[29] The birds do not return, the bees collect honey whenever possible and seeds do not sprout in the brief spell of the warm weather in autumn. But this is something beside the point. What Emily Dickinson wishes to present is the

29 In the light of H.L.Mencken's description, Emily Dickinson's poem is based more on fancy than on actual truth. Presumably, her surmises are based on the observation of spring when unexpected frost kills the blossoms of fruit trees, practising deception on the flowers, in a manner of speaking.

deceptiveness or the apparent plausibity of Indian summer which almost induces belief that summer has returned again, warding off the bleakness of winter. The poet is unconvinced because of her superior knowledge and so is the bee which is the shrewdest insect. But the blue and gold sky which the poet knows to be a mistake, resumes the sophistries of June so realistically that the birds and the seeds are deceived like the daisy of the poem discussed earlier. The serenity of the Indian summer seems almost divine and Emily Dickinson employs religious terminology of sacrament and last communion to express the elevated and sacred feelings evoked by it. The reference to herself as a child is apparently an illusion to the scripture, Matthew 18:3, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven", although she often made such references to herself in her mature years.[30]

If Emily Dickinson expressed the lurking fear of autumn in her prayer of mock-seriousness,

> Grant me, Oh Lord a sunny mind -
> Thy windy will to bear! Vol. I, 131

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30 In the decade of Eighteen Fifties, she called herself "Emilie" and she did not seem to have fully matured till she had passed her thirtieth year. She once wrote in her letter to Abiah, "She is more of a woman than I am, for I love so to be a child -" This comment, however, did not mean that she wanted to escape reality. She rather hoped that she would not lose the power of seeing things with the freshness of childlike wonder. See also Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 16-17, 38.

she was outspoken in her expression of dislike for the dreary winter. It may have its "hoary delights" but most certainly "welcome when he goes". (Vol. II, 1316). It is an interruption which despoils summer like the deluge of Noah which swept the world once but is now a legend almost discredited (Vol. I, 403). It is the "Finland of the year" where only the reindeer lives. Again,she looks on the winter scene with faintly amused disapproval.

> Like Brooms of Steel
> The Snow and Wind
> Had swept the Winter Street -
> The House was hooked
> The Sun sent out
> Faint Deputies of Heat -
> Where rode the Bird
> The Silence tied
> His ample - plodding Steed. Vol. II, 1252

The closed house, the feeble sun and the oppressive silence where winter ties its ample-plodding steed, characterize the dreariness of the season which has the look of death on its face. In one of her poems she gives expression to the concentrated gloom and sadness of the skeleton bareness of winter.

> There's a certain Slant of light,
> Winter Afternoons -
> That oppresses, like the Heft
> Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - any -
'Tis the Seal Despair -
An imporial affliction
Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -
Shadows - hold their breath -
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death - Vol. I, 258

Afternoons are always marked by the slanting rays of the sun going down on its journey in the west but on winter afternoons that the poet speaks of, there is an unusual atmospheric gloom in the slant of light comparable to the heavy, vibrating tunes of the cathedral at High Mass.[31] It brings unspeakable sadness at human predicament, although it can be felt only internally and is not related to or consequent upon any physical suffering; it is concerned only with the spirit where the significance of the things prennially lie. Such winter afternoons confirm the authenticity of the despair caused by winter which man is helpless to alter ("None may teach it - Any") and which man must

31 High Mass is celebrated with incense and music, the priest being assisted by a deacon and sub-deacon, as against Low Mass which is celebrated by one priest without music and with little ceremony.

endure like an affliction sent by God. The landscape shudders to listen its approaching footsteps, the shadows freeze with fear and when it goes away, one cannot fail to notice the cold, unfeeling look as on the face of the dead. The concluding stanza indirectly employs the Pluto - Persephone myth. The coming of winter is like the threatening arrival of Pluto who carried off Persephone-Proserpine while she was gathering flowers in the vale of Enna in Sicily. Zeus, at the prayer of Demeter, allowed persephone to spend six months of the year on earth and the remaining with Pluto. The myth symbolizes the burying of the seed during winter with the look of death on its face and its growth in spring, marking the return of persephone.[32]

Associated with winter are frost and snow and they also attracted the poet's attention. She notices in particular the fatal touch of the frost which visits in the night and concludes its interview before the sunrise, "Caresses - and is gone".

> But whom his fingers touched -
> And where his feet have run -
> And whatsoever Mouth he kissed -
> Is as it had not been. Vol. I, 391

The poet returns to this theme again a few years later to describe the frost as never to be seen or if seen, passing

32 Oxford Companion to English Literature, Ed. Sir Paul Harvey, (Oxford, 1960), p. 641.

rapidly in inordinate haste. The flowers notice the stranger first hovering around and a search is made for the despoiler to no purpose.

> Till some retrieveless Night
> Our Vigilence at waste
> The Garden gets the only shot
> That never could be traced Vol. II, 1202

The image presented in the first poem discussed here, is that of the seducer and in the second that of a thief - assassin. The assassin image is repeated again with a grimness that is terrifying.

> Apparently with no surprise
> To any happy Flower
> The Frost beheads it at its play -
> In accidental power -
> The blonde Assassin passes on -
>
> The Sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another Day
> For an Approving God. Vol. III, 1624

The remorseless destruction of the frost is appropriately linked with winter which symbolizes death. The frost's cruelty is obvious from the fact that it kills aimlessly, without any ostensible design, while it is at play. The power it wields is not used deliberately but apparently accidently and it moves on nonchalantly as if nothing has happened. The sun also proceeds

to measure off another day without feeling any sympathy for the beheaded flower and apparently God looks on this grim drama with approval.[33] Thus there seems to be a dark design operating with disconcerting indifference to the fate of victims in the temporal scene. Similar in mood, is her poem on snow-storm in which the outer scene described is one of deadness, deprived of all human or animal activity. It denotes an emptiness caused by the plunder of the predatory snow.

It shifts from Leaden Sieves -
It powders all the Wood.
If fills with Alabaster Wool
The Wrinkles of the Road -

It makes an Even Face
Of Mountain, and of Plain -
Unbroken Forehead from the East
Unto the East again -

It reaches to the Fence -
It wraps it Rail by Rail
Till it is lost in Fleeces -
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack - and Stem -
A Summer's empty Room -
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were -
Recordless, but for them -

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33 There are many disparraging references to God, some bordering on blasphemy, in Emily Dickinson's poetry. They have been analysed and discussed in Chapter IX "Immortality".

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts
As Ankles of Queen
Then stills it's Artisans - like Ghosts -
Denying they have been - Vol. I, 311

The metaphor of the leaden sieve for the grey sky is precise but lead suggests the weight of death, so does alabaster of the alabaster wool used metaphorically for snow-flakes. The death image thus runs throughout the poem, suggested indirectly by words and pharases such as 'even face', 'celestial vail', 'stump, and stack - and stem', 'stills' 'ghosts'. Winter is thus a season of frozen activity with death hovering over the natural world and Emily Dickinson does not minimize its grim and terrifying aspect. In this attitude, again, she rejects the Emersonian notion that the earth rejoices in winter to clothe its imperfections in the purity of white snow.[34] The change of season also did not give her, as it gave to her romantic compeers, the assurance of rebirth and regeneration.[35] Her

34 The allusion is to Emerson's poem, "The Snow-Storm". Emerson had, in fact, echoed the old Christian view of half-animate nature, conscious of her imperfections, awaiting the advent of her Creator. Milton employed an elaborate conceit in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" in the second stanza of "The Hymn"

Only with speechless fan
She woes the gentle air
To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
Confounded that her Maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities.

35 The allusion is to Bryant and Emerson. In English poetry such assurance is embodied in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" and The Revolt of Islam (Canto IX).

concern was not the metaphysical implications of the cyclic variation; she kept her attention rivetted to the pageant of varying colours and sounds and amused, delighted, or repelled, she recreated in words her perception of the outer scene. That was the ideal she had set for herself so far as nature was concerned and she strove without wavering to achieve her ideal.

III

It was natural, therefore, for her to observe not only the seasons but also the different nuances and the varying moods of each day. The morning, the sunrise and the sunset engaged her attention with animated fascination and she described what she saw with equal precision. In one of her early poems, she expresses her childish anguish to know what the nature of morning or day is. "Has it feet like Water lilies? / Has it feathers like a Bird?"(Vol. I, 101). A large number of poems that she wrote subsequently on this subject, are more or less answers to that initial query. She thought of sun and morning as king and queen and as the morning is touched by the sun, the radiant glow of happiness assures the morning that life would be eternal spring. But the sun slowly wheels along the orchards and the deserted queen is left forlorn.

The Morning - fluttered - staggered -
Felt feebly - for Her Crown -
Her unannointed forehead -
Henceforth - Her only One - Vol. I, 232

Those who have had the pleasure of watching a sunrise, know its suddenness in spite of the banners of colour heralding its approach. Emily Dickinson wrote two poems on this phenomenon, both remarkable for the economy of words and the evocative exhuberance of similies. In one of the poems, she speaks of the day springing before the hills "Like Hindered Rubbies - or the Light / A Sudden Musket - spills -" /. The comparison of the sunrise with the flash from the barrel of a musket may be a hyperbole but it catches the essence of the morning scene. Immediately after this striking simile, she speaks, with characteristic restraint, of the purple which could no longer hold the eastern horizon as "The Sunrise shook abroad / Like Breadths of Topaz ..." /. As the morning extends into the broad day, the poet notices its spangled glory almost oriental in its splendour and again she employs an unusual simile to denote the richness and variety of its colour.

The Orchard sparkled like a Jew
How mighty 't was - to be
A Guest in this stupendous place
The Parlor - of the Day - Vol. I, 304

The comparison of the Orchard, glittering in the brilliant sunshine, with a Jew may appear distracting. Jewel, one might think, would have been more appropriate. But the idea seems to be that a rich Jew of the medieval ages, wearing turqnoise and diamond rings and precious beads, would be a more picturesque point of comparison.[36] The poem ends on a note of rejoicing that it was great to be a guest in the day's magnificient parlour, the outer scene of stupendous magnitude.

The other poem on the same subject needs to be quoted in full.

I'll tell you how the Sun rose -
A Ribbon at a time -
The Steeples swam in Amethyst -
The news, like Squirrels, ran -
The Hills untied their Bonnets -
The Bobolinks - begun -
Then I said softly to myself -
"That must have been the Sun!"
But how he set - I know not -
There seemed a purple stile
That little Yellow boys and girls
Were climbing all the while -
Till when they reached the other side,
A Dominie in Gray -
Put gently up the evening Bars -
And led the fleck away - Vol. I, 318

36 With the simile of the Jew, she recalls all the richness imported from the East during the Italian Renaissance, as invoked by Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice.

The sunrise and the sunset have been compressed into one poem here, devoting neatly eight lines to the description of each. Here, again, very striking comparisons are made of the news of the morning with a squirrel, of the lingering rays of the evening sun with little yellow boys and girls and finally of the dusk after the sunset with a clergyman in his usual grey dress. The steeple, viewed with the eastern horizon in the background, seems to swim in a sea of purple water. The morning rays reveal the peaks of the mountains, suggesting the metaphor of the fifth line, "The Hills untied their Bonnets" -. In both these poems the brilliance of the sunrise has been seen in terms of the glitter of precious stones - the rubies, the topaz and the amethyst - which also denote the rich variety of colours.

The poems on sunset also employ images and conceits which surprise by their originality and newness.[37] One such conceit she used in one of her early poems, which was published anonymously in the Spring Field Daily Republican of March, 1864, appropriately in the "Wit and Wisdom" column, titled "Sunset".

> Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
> Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
> Then at the feet of the old Horizon
> Laying its spotted Face to die
> Stooping as low as the Otter's Window
> Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
> Kissing its Bonnet to the Meadow
> And the juggler of Day is gone. Vol. I, 228

37 See Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet, pp.137-138.

The entire span of the day is compressed in the first line: the blazing gold of the morning sun is quenched in the purple of the sunset. The journey of the sun from the east horizon to the west is described by the unusual simile of the leopard across the sky. The yellow background of the leopard's skin resembles the golden blaze of the day and the black spots have their equivalent in the spotted dimness of the light seen at the sunset. So the leopard-sun falls to the western horizon to die. Finally, after going down as low as the Otter's window and after touching the roof and colouring the barn, the juggler of the day, the sun, kisses its bonnet as a final gesture of leave - taking. The version of the poem reproduced by Professor Johnson has 'her' in place of 'its' in line four and seven.[38] In that case the leopard conceit would be applicable to the day in general and not only to the sun. The day would be a woman juggler bidding good-bye after kissing her bonnet. Emily Dickinson has presented the day as a lady elsewhere too.

> The Day undressed - Herself -
> Her Garter - was of Gold -
> Her Petticoat - of Purple plain -
> Her Dimities - as old. Vol.II, 716

Emily Dickinson returned to a similar image to describe

38 For the four different versions of the poem, see The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Ed. Thomas H. Johnson, Vol.I, pp.163-165.

the setting - sun, although at first reading, one is likely to miss the point of the poem.

A Dying Tiger - moaned for Drink -
I hunted all the Sand -
I caught the Dripping of a Rock
And bore it in my Hand -

His Mighty Balls - in death were thick
But searching - I could see
A Vision on the Retina
Of Water - and of me -

'T was not my blame - who sped too slow -
'T was not his blame - who died
While I was reaching him -
But 't was - the fact that He was dead - Vol.II, 566

The dying tiger is the leopard of the poem discussed earlier seen only briefly at the horizon. The red-ball appearance of the setting sun is suggested indirectly by the thirsty tiger moaning for a drink but before water can be rushed to it, it is dead. The last wish of the tiger is imprinted on the retina of its mighty eyeballs - the image of water and of the poet carrying water in her hand. Just as the poet had seen the sudden emergence of the rising sun, she also noticed the magestic brevity of the setting sun. The tiger image as well as the purple bloom (efflorescene) suggests the royal grandeur which she constantly evoked in her descriptions of

the sunset.[39]

Apart from the horizon, the lingering gold of the setting sun makes the mountains gleam before they are dissolved in the darkness of the nightfall. The poet looks at the mountains in several of her poems. "The Hills in purple syllables / The Day's Adventures tell" / (Vol.II, 1016), she observed in one of her poems. She notices the "Bloom upon the Mountain -" defying classification or exact reproduction and wonders:

> Who for tilling - to the Mountain
> Come, and disappear - Vol.II, 667

Again, she describes the mountains rising to prominence as the twilight envelopes the plains.

> The Mountains - grow unnoticed -
> Their Purple figures rise
> Without attempt - Exhaustion -
> Assistance or Applause -
>
> In Their Eternal Faces
> The sun - with just delight
> Looks long - and last - and golden
> For fellowship - at night - Vol.II, 757

In another poem, she makes a startlingly familiar comparison of the glow of the sunset with the "Mighty Foot Lights" of a stupendous theatre where "The far Theatricals of Day" are being staged. The universe applauds but the chief guest among the

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39 See also David T.Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry, (Harvard, 1966), p.28.

audience was God himself, the ordainer as well as the spectator of the whole show.

> Like Mighty Foot Lights - burned the Red
> At Bases of the Trees -
> The far Theatricals of Day
> Exhibiting - to These -
>
> 'T was Universe - that did applaud -
> While Chiefest - of the Crowd -
> Enabled by his Royal Dress -
> Myself distinguished God - Vol.II, 596

She uses familiar but unusual metaphors[40] again in another poem on sunset, presented this time as an unprecedented conflagration which is noticed without surprise or concern.

> The largest Fire ever known
> Occurs each Afternoon -
> Discovered is without surprise
> Proceeds without concern -
> Consumes and no report to men
> And Occidental Town,
> Rebuilt another morning
> To be burned down again Vol.II, 1114

The occidental town is the western horizon which is consumed each evening and rebuilt in the morning to be burned down again.

40 For other striking metaphors, see Gelpi, Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet, pp. 99, 120, 137-141, 151-152.

In addition to these poems where the description is pictorial, trying to render in words the spectacle of the outer world, there are also occasions when the unimpeachable beauty of the sunset leads her to the contemplation of the timeless and the eternal. The glow of the sunset, according to her, is a partial manifestation of the timeless which defies analysis by man whose understanding is limited and circumscribed by time. The scientist and the theologian are both destined to failure, for the infinite cannot be analysed in terms of the finite.[41]

> The Lilac is an ancient shrub
> But ancienter than that
> The Firmamental Lilac
> Upon the Hill tonight -
> The Sun subsiding on his Course
> Bequeathes this final Plant
> To contemplation - not to Touch -
> The Flower of Occident.
> Of one Corolla is the West -
> The Calyx is the Earth -
> The Capsule's burnished Seeds the Stars -
> The Scientist of Faith
> His research has but just begun -
> Above his synthesis

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41 Letters, Vol. III, L. 871. Emily Dickinson wrote of human life as "Moving on in the Dark like Loaded Boats at Night, though there is no Course, there is Boundlessness." See also poems, Vol. I, 349; Vol. II, 800, 1090 and Vol. III, 1462.

The Flora unimpeachable
To Time's Analysis -
"Eye hath not seen" may possibly
Be current with the Blind
But let not Revelation
By theses be detained - Vol.III, 1241

The lilac is a hardy, wild shrub known from ancient times but the purple efflorescence of the sunset (The Firmamental Lilac) is older and as the sun goes down in the west, it bequeathes this plant (the firmamental lilac) and the pale purple flower on the horizon for contemptation. This flower has its vast petal in the west, of which the calyx is the earth and the stars are the shining seeds carried in the inner corolla. The theologian (Scientist of Faith), his research and interpretation cannot reach the sublime beauty of the firmamental lilac (The Flora unimpeachable) which is beyond temporal time and beyond the analysis offered within the limits of time whether scientific or theological. The belief in the words, I Corinthians 2:9 ; "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him", is tentamount to blindness caused by lack or weakness of faith. For those who can see, the firmamental lilac is a revelation of the infinite and the timeless and immortality. We measure time by the help of sun but the sun itself is free from time ("dateless"), as she says in another poem.

Upon His dateless Fame
Our Periods may lie
As Stars that drop anonymous
From an abundant sky. Vol.II, 999

The sun and its lilac, thus, are visual representations of immortality ordained for man's contemplation only.[42]

Emily Dickinson, however, does not speak with similar seriousness very often. The change of mood and tone is one of the greatest attractions of her poetry; it holds the attention of the reader and protects her utterance from monotony and dullness. In one of her poems she describes the sun emerging from his "amazing House" and leaving a day at every door without any pomp and funfare. As compared to its quiet dignity,

The Earth has seemed to me a Drum,
Pursued of little Boys. Vol.II, 888

Again, in a display of metaphysical wit, she employs, almost imperceptibly, the image of the circus ringmaster for the sun and presents a delightful picture of a day threatened to be smothered with fog.

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42 This is not to be confused with Emersonian transcendental doctrine when he said, "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God", a statement which, according to Perry Miller, was attacked as the latest form of infidelity. Interpretations of American Literature, p.119. In the same book, Allen Tate, in his famous essay on Emily Dickinson, casually refers to Emerson as a "light-bearer who could see nothing but light, and was fearfully blind." p.200.

The Sun and Fog contested
The Government of Day -
The Sun took down his Yellow Whip
And drove the Fog away - Vol.III, 1190

The sun does not allow its "yellow plan" to be interrupted by the caprices of the atmosphere, she says in another poem. Even when the snow

Heaves Balls of Specks, like Vicious Boy
Directly in His Eye -
Does not so much as turn His Head
Busy with Majesty - Vol.II, 591

These poems are delightful interludes in her devoted tributes to the sun, seen through almost all possible angles of the mortal, human eye. Such tributes are the continuation of an age-old tradition of the poets and priests paying homage to the life-giver sun.[43]

Like the sun, the moon also engaged her poetic attention as it had done in the case of many poets of the past. If one had the desire, a sizeable anthology could be compiled of poems written about the moon. Like Dante's tribute to the sun in the opening lines of the Divine Comedy, the poetic effusions about the moon in the past had been more or less in the nature of sentimental homage paid to its placid beauty or to the perfection

43 In Indian tradition, it goes back to the hymns of Rig Veda in tribute to Ushas. Dante's opening lines in the Divine Comedy and in imitation of him, Shelley's opening lines in "The Triumph of Life" are notable examples.

of its form. It was an attitude which Emily Dickinson had deliberately ruled out from her poetry. She saw all the objects of nature in peculiar relationship to her response and perception, and what she felt and wrote about them, had the unmistakable stamp of her orginality. The originality is there both in the thought and in the imagery. We have already noted some of the striking images and conceits in her description of the sun and the same characteristic is maintained in the similes and metaphors she employs in the description of the moon. In one of her poems she calls the moon Ishmael, the outcast son of Abraham,[44] suggesting the lonely wandering of the moon in the unchartered and extensive realms of the sky. The metaphor remains unusual in spite of the Biblical name and its facile connotation (Vol. II, 504). The moon, seen through a window pane against the background of a cloudless sky, is common enough experience but it provides the poet many a turn for her whimsy. She considers the moon as a weary traveller whose privilege it was to stop at the window pane for rest. But the moon was also a stranger, a "Lady in the Town" who did not think it impolite to peep through the glass-panes and intrude upon the privacy of the poet. The poet gazes at the moon and notices that it was only a face, a head which had rolled away after it had been guillotined.

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44 Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar, hence allusively an outcast. Genesis 16:12, "And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him".

But like a Head - a Guillotine
Slid carelessly away - Vol.II, 629

This striking simile, however, does not satisfy the poet and she employs another, a more familiar one this time.

Or like a Stemless Flower -
Upheld in rolling Air
By finer Gravitations -
Than bind philosopher - Vol.II, 629

The description over, the poet muses how the moon is free from all wordly cares and concerns, and with one singleminded devotion, shines and illuminates the world.

But seemed engrossed to Absolute -
With shining - and the Sky Vol.II, 629

Perfection, illumination and the sky keep the moon engrossed, and the indirect implication is, that it would have not been possible if the moon had other preoccupations. In another poem, Emily Dickinson does not consider the moon as only a face but fancifully constructs the feminine figure of the moon extending from the sky to the earth.

Her Bonnet is the Firmament -
The Universe - Her Shoe -
The Stars - the Trinkets at Her Belt -
Her Dimities - of Blue - Vol.II, 737

As the sun and the moon impressed Emily Dickinson with their

permanence, the granite solidness of the mountains gave her a sense of satisfaction and security. She admired the serenity of the snow-clad peaks as well as their nonchalance with which they looked upon the pageants of pomp or parting.[45] In one of her poems, "Ah, Teneriffe", she comments on the ancient mountain range of the Canary Islands which seem to retreat with the horizon.

> Sunset - reviews her Saphire Regiment -
> Day - drops you her Red Adieu! Vol.II, 666

She returns to the same subject again in the manner of the metaphysical poets.[46]

> The Mountain sat upon the Plain
> In his tremendous Chair -
> His observation omnifold,
> His inquest, everywhere -
>
> The Seasons played around his knees
> Like Children round a sire -
> Grandfather of the Days is He
> Of Dawn, the Ancestor - Vol.II, 975

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45 Emily Dickinson's observation of nature is in accordance with the view of Melville expressed in Pierre, Book XXV, Chapter IV, "Say what some poets will, Nature is not so much her own ever-sweet interpreter, as the mere supplier of that cunning alphabet, whereby selecting and combining, as he pleases, each man reads his own peculiar lesson according to his own peculiar mind and mood."

46 The image of the mountain sitting like a magistrate on a big chair, is witty in finding similarity between two apparently dissimilar objects.

The mountains, because of their great height, can observe all things around and their equanimity or repose has the magisterial dignity holding a judicial inquiry. The fact that the mountains have nothing to do with the creation of seasons, is irrelevant. What the poet suggests is that seasons come and go and play around with apparently no effect on the grandeur of the mountains. Similarly, the day and the dawn are not the offsprings of the mountains but as the mountains are on the east horizon, the sun seems to be born as it emerges above them every morning, bringing dawn and later the day.

The sea should have been another symbol of permanence for her but there is no evidence in her letters that she had ever gone to a beach or ever lived in close proximity to the sea.[46A] There is one poem, however, which does describe the sea, although the description has significant sexual undertones.[47] As she "visited the Sea", the mermaids came out from the bottom to look at her and the frigates sailing on the surface of the sea, extended their "Hempen Hands" in cordial greeting. The tide came to meet her and, since no one had warned her to move away, the tide enveloped her.

46A Jay Leyda, Vol.II, p. 452. She wrote to Mrs. Todd, in Europe: "I am glad you cherish the Sea. We correspond, though I never met him."

47 At least in this respect, she is similar to Walt Whitman about whom she wrote, according to Jay Leyda, Vol.II, p.57, "You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his Book - but was told he was disgraceful." Whitman suggests love-making by the heaving waves in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking".

But no Man moved Me - till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe
And past my Apron - and my Belt
And past my Boddice - too

And made as He would eat me up -
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve -
And then - I started - too -

And He - He followed - close behind -
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ancle - Then my Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl -

Until We met the Solid Town -
No One He seemed to know -
And bowing - with a Mighty look -
At me - The Sea withdrew - Vol.II, 520

It is difficult to see why Emily Dickinson always associated sex with the sea but in her love poems too, the sea is inseparably clothed in sex imagery. Perhaps the heaving waves suggested to her love making as it did to Himingway[48] or was it the rocking and rolling of the waves which seemed to her symbolic of the sexual act? One wonders at the concreteness of the suggestion, "And made as He would eat me up -", and at the audacious, almost brash male figure of the sea as he follows

48 The allusion is to Ernest Hemingway's, The Old Man and the Sea and Islands in the Stream.

till the time of parting comes and he withdraws with a bow and "with a Mighty look" at her. Or is it an indirect suggestion that the poet loved the sea as she would have loved a man?

Chapter - V

NATURE'S CREATURES

Like the everchanging face of the outer world and its manifold phenomena, Emily Dickinson was also fascinated by the variety of its creatures and they all found place in her poetry. The birds, particularly the song birds, had the pride of place in her affection and she never tired to record her response to their individual idiosyncracies of behaviour or the richness of their songs. The song of a bird, she said in one of her poems, is "a lonesome glee" which "sanctifies the mind". The process of purification is set in not so much by the melody as by the expression of "Delight without a cause -" which is as "arrestless" as the invisible bird which pours forth the notes of its joyful song from the unknown expanse of the sky (Vol.II, 774). In a mainly descriptive poem on the bluebird, she returns to the same theme in the concluding lines.

> With gay delays he goes
> To some superior Tree
> Without a single Leaf
> And shouts for joy to Nobody
> But his seraphic self - Vol.III, 1465

The song, or rather the songs of the bluebird, are punctuated by discerning intervals for the listener to choose from the various specimens of songs produced by the bird. This desire on the part of the bird to cater to the need of the listener, is obviously attributable to the whimsy of the poet who nevertheless does not fail to note that the irrepressible delight of the song, as the song itself, is addressed to no one except the bird's own "seraphic self". According to Emily Dickinson, an unmitigated joy forms the central core of the bird's song and this characteristic is predominantly described in her poems.

This attitude of the poet, however, is not new or original. Almost all her predecessors in America and England had noted the "full-throated ease" with which a nightengale or a skylark sang but they always contrasted the delight of the bird with the unending grief of human predicament.[1] If there is any thing singular about Emily Dickinson's attitude, it is her consistent refusal to cloud the joyousness of the song with human sorrow. For her, the purity of the song's expressed delight remained unsullied and infectious for those who listened to it.

> Upon his Saddle sprung a Bird
> And crossed a thousand Trees
> Before a Fence without a Fare
> His Fantasy did please
> And then he lifted up his Throat
> And squandered such a Note

---

1 The allusion is to Keats's "Ode to Nightingale" and Shelley's "To a Skylark".

A Universe that overheard
Is stricken by it yet. Vol.III, 1600

The first four lines indirectly suggest the carefree life of the bird which ignores a thousand trees before alighting on a fence. The concluding lines describe the intense note released from an uplifted throat remarkable for its powerful melody, loaded with delight. The note is so intense that those listening to the song are paralysed for a long time by the lavishness of the expressed delight. The key words are 'squandered' suggesting profuseness, and 'striken' suggesting the forceful impact of the song. The reverbrating memory of the song is indicated by the frugal use of the word 'yet'. One might argue that the extravagant note does not necessarily suggest joy and that the concern of the poet was more with the profuseness of the melody than with anything else. This interpretation, however, would not be in keeping with the description of the bird in the opening lines, although in another of her poems, she speaks of joy as something akin to anguish and inquires almost dejectedly:

Why Birds, a Summer morning
Before the Quick of Day
Should stab my ravished spirit
With Dirks of Melody. Vol. III, 1420

It is unusual metaphor to call the notes of melody as daggers

(Dirks) which stab the enraptured spirit of the poet and it implies pain in the clearest terms. And yet the pain is one caused by joy and not by suffering. That explains the opening of the poem with the lines: "One Joy of so much anguish / Sweet nature has for me".

In fact Emily Dickinson believed that a bird sings to express an inner delight which it cannot repress. That the song imparts, at least a fraction of that delight, to the listener, is incidental. Even any admiration for the song is outside the bird's intention; it sings to please itself. This idea has repeatedly been expressed in several of her poems. She talks of the most triumphant bird which embarked upon a twig

> And sang for nothing scrutable
> But intimate Delight. Vol.III, 1265

Again, she repeats the same idea in another poem.

> Nor was it for applause -
> That I could ascertain -
> But independent Extasy
> Of Deity and Men - Vol.II, 783

The desire for applause or admiration, however genuine, was not in the bird's scheme of things; the delight of the bird is independent of the divine or human approbation. And it is not the song only but the entire gamut of the bird's behaviour

which radiates unstinted happiness. She noticed a bird which, after disregarding the trees, "situated softly upon a pile of wind" and floated joyously, and that was its remedy for care (Vol.III, 1723). The carefree life of the travelling bird made her cares, even her entire career, look absurd (Vol.III, 1655). A bird does not need a ladder to climb to the sky nor a conductor when it sings (Vol.III, 1574). These descriptions sample the abundant happiness of the bird which is completely free from the harrowing anxieties of human life. The contrast is presented only rarely and it is mostly in the form of human participation in the bird's delight.

Sometimes Emily Dickinson playfully dressed a bird in mock grandeur or seriousness as in the description of a jay.

> Sitting a Bough like a Brigadier
> Confident and straight -
> Much is the mien of him in March
> As a Magistrate - Vol.III, 1177

She returns to the brigadier image, again, in another poem and adds that the jay is also a neighbour and a warrior who pursues winds with "shrill felicity".

> The Snow and he are intimate -
> I've often seen them play
> When Heaven looked upon us all
> With such severity
> I felt apology were due
> To an insulted sky

Whose pompous frown was Nutriment
To their Temerity - Vol.III, 1561

The significant point which the poem makes, is that the bird is equally unaffected by the favours and frowns of the weather just as it is free from worldly care. Here again the bird presents a contrast to human situation which becomes gloomy in the face of inclement weather. In fact, the bird in its rash and foolhardy playfulness, seems to insult an intimidating sky whose "pompous frown" adds to its frivolous merriment.

Emily Dickinson also used the bird's song as a metaphor for objective reality or beauty. The song of an oriole may be something commonplace or divine, depending on the perception of the hearer. The song of the bird may be completely wasted on those who, like the crowd, are unable to hear it. Even those who hear the song, "The fashion of the Ear / Attireth that it hear". The skeptic may question the validity of this argument and may point out that the song is in the tree where the bird is and exists in its own right, independent of the human ear. But the poet insists that the song, at least the nature of it, is in the listener who perceives it according to the level of his sensibility.

The "Tune is in the Tree" -
The Skeptic - showeth me -
"Nor Sir! In Thee" Vol.II, 527

The poet seems to suggest that what the human mind perceives is the reality.[2] This is not to deny that objective reality has existence or that the human mind can operate regardless of it, which is all important to an artist, and which gives meaning to it in purely subjective terms. The song may be imperishably stored in the memory of the listener even after the bird ceases to exist in the tree and if it can exist without the oriole, the song is in the listener and not in the tree. This line of argument may lead to many complications but it establishes the fact that objective reality has to be perceived subjectively if it has to have any real significance for human beings.

Emily Dickinson, however, achieves the most lasting effect not in poems of philosophical contemplation but where she observes exactly and renders the texture of her observation with a quaint wizardry of precision in words of singular intensity and individuality. Even when she describes something commonplace, her mode of utterance points out to a distinctive quality. We come across lines which make us pause to admire the delicate touch given by the poet.

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2 See Thoreau's essay, "Autumnal Hints" in Excursion where he writes: "The actual objects which one man will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those another will see as the beholders are different... We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads, - and then we can hardly see anything else." Skirting the philosophical implications of the hypothesis, Emily Dickinson laid emphasis on the perception of the poet.

A Sparrow took a Slice of Twig
And thought it very nice. Vol.III, 1211

We meet a woodpecker and in the words of the poet:

He laboreth at every Tree
A Worm, His utmost Goal. Vol. ii, 1034

Again, we see the robin in her typical pharasing:

The Robin is a Gabriel
In humble circumstances -
His Dress denotes him socially,
Of Transport's Working Classes. Vol.III, 1483

In one of her early poems, she describes a bird as it comes in the garden but the choice of words makes her poem a memorable picture.

A Bird came down the walk -
He did not know I saw -
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass -
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass -

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around -
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought -
He stirred his Velvet Head. Vol.I, 328

Her most famous description occurs in her poem on the humming bird, "A Route of Evanescenece". Many distinguished explications of this poem exist.[3] Professor Thomas H. Johnson has pointed out in his editorial note that this poem bears no artistic relation to an earlier poem on the same subject, "Within my Garden, rides a Bird". While one agrees that the later poem is not a redaction of the earlier one, a comparison of the two has relevance in showing Emily Dickinson's poetic craftsmanship. The earlier poem embodies the basic image of the wheel in swift motion for the bird and only the vibrating blossoms testify to the bird's rapid passage, but the poem is discursive and a little drawn out.

Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel -
Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
As 'twere a travelling Mill -

He never stops, but slackens
Above the Ripest Rose -
Partakes without alighting
And praises as he goes,

Till every spice is tasted -
And then his Fairy Gig
Reels in remoter atmospheres -
And I rejoin my Dog,

3 See Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise, pp.113-117; Whicher, This was a Poet, pp. 261-262; Porter, The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry, pp. 76-77; Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 202.

And He and I, perplex us
If positive, 'twere we -
Or bore the Garden in the Brain
This curiousity -

But He, the best Logician
Refers my clumsy eye -
To just vibrasing Blossoms
An Exquisite Reply! Vol. II, 500

The poet returned to the same subject about twenty years later in 1880 and compressed the description in a single stanza consisting eight lines of unpredictable aptness. The structural integrity of the later poem heightens its evocative power and the tension of the metaphors releases the refined surprise of her wit.

A Route of Evanescene
With a revolving Wheel -
A Resonance of Emerald -
A Rush of Cochineal -
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head -
The mail from Tunis probably,
An easy Morning's Ride - Vol.III, 1463

The swift, almost elusive, passage of the bird is suggested by the first line and, as it circles round the buds and blossoms, it gives the impression of a revolving wheel. The touch of the green in its wings and the humming sound it

produces on its way, are merged into the third line. The red patch on its throat is seen as a splash of cochineal as the bird rushes and disappears, leaving behind the tumbled blossoms to testify to its existence. The poet muses that the bird was like a postman bringing mail from distant Tunis on its everyday route - the route of evanescence.

It has already been shown that Emily Dickinson uses the song of the bird as a metaphor for objective reality. She has used it once as a metaphor for creative art. Traditionally, a creative artist suffers many deprivations and, in most cases, dies before a full recognition of his art and the consequent material affluence. Even when such recognition comes in his life - time, he is usually past the age when he can really enjoy or benefit from the fruits of his labour. It would be wrong to believe that any artist is wilfully denied the material comforts which he deserves. The truth of the matter is that since creative art does not satisfy material needs, its aesthetic appeal takes longer to establish its worth. Emily Dickinson muses over this problem and in her characteristic manner comments on it.

> What merit have the Tune
> No Breakfast if it guaranty Vol.II, 880

Ignoring the grammatical incongruity of the first line, the poet's meaning is clear enough. Of what use is a song if it

cannot guarantee subsistence to the singer? If the artist is of any worth, he should be able to fulfill the minimal needs through his art.

II

Emily Dickinson did not ignore the humbler creatures of nature. The bee, the spider, the butterfly, the cricket, the frog, the bat, the rat and the snake all receive their due share of her attention. She does not look down upon them with derision or contempt. Her attitude is more of amusement than resentment against them. In certain cases she even envies some of the qualities they possess. The bee is one such creature which the poet admires and envies. She notices the bee's feet "shod with gauze" and its helmet of gold as it drives in its burnished carriage. In a light-hearted mood she envies the freedom of a bee and as compared to it, she finds herself a captive living in a dark prison.

> Could I but ride indefinite
> As doth the Meadow Bee
> And visit only where I liked
> And No one visit me
>
> And flirt all Day with Buttercups
> And marry whom I may
> And dwell a little everywhere
> Or better, run away

With no Police to follow
Or chase Him if He do
Till He should jump peninsulas
To get away from me -

I said "But just to be a Bee"
Upon a Raft of Air
And row in Nowhere all Day long
And anchor "off the Bar"

What Liberty! So Captives deem
Who tight in Dungeons are. Vol. II, 661

The envy for the bee's liberty, however, is short lived, as she jokingly ponders over the moral issues involved in the activities of the bee, and pronounces it to be a traitor, for the bee does not remain faithful to a flower and presents its services to the new buds as they appear. Its suit is only a "chance" and its "troth" is as fickle as the everchanging breeze, for the bee propounds "ban" and divorce continually (Vol.II,896). On another occasion, she praises the continence of the bee and holds it as a good enough example to follow.

Partake as doth the Bee,
Abstemiously. Vol. II, 994

Like the bee, the butterfly also goes on its "spangled journey" and with similar freedom waltzes upon a farm or rests on a beam. Appropriately enough, the butterfly, dressed in

elegant colours, is presented as a lady emerging from the door of a cacoon on a summer afternoon "to stray abroad" and

> Her pretty Parasol be seen
> Contracting in a Field. Vol. I, 354

During winter, it retires to its "Damask Residence" (cocoon) to sew silk.

> Then, finer than a Lady
> Emerges in the spring! Vol. I, 173

In another poem, she presents the butterfly as a male figure, almost an aristocrat, who puts on his festive gown (assumption gown) hung in the apartment of light green quartz (cacoon) and condescendingly comes down to befriend the buttercups.

> The Butterfly's Assumption Gown
> In Chrysoprase Apartments hung
> This afternoon put on -
> How condescending to descend
> And be of Buttercups the friend
> In a New England Town - Vol.III, 1244

The assumption gown becomes a "Numidian Gown" in another poem, referring to the colourful dress of the ancient kingdom in north Africa. The butterfly's picturesque outer elegance is matched with its inner freedom from mundane worries.

The Butterfly upon the Sky,
That doesn't know its Name
And hasn't any tax to pay
And hasn't any home. Vol. III, 1521

Like the butterfly, the colourful flowers also attracted her attention and made her wonder about the fountains from which the flood of daisies flowed on the hillside. Her poem on the tulip is one of the most memorable ones.

She slept beneath a tree -
Remembered but by me.
I touched her Cradle mute -
She recognized the foot -
Put on her carmine suit
And see! Vol. I, 25

Here too she presents the flower as a lady, a method which persists in all her poetry of seeing the non-human into human forms.

If the butterfly is a lady and an aristocrat, the spider is an artist, the "neglected son of genius". Its merits are generally certified but it has never been employed fully for any real work. That explains the poet's desire to befriend the spider. In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson describes the spider absorbed in its delicate work of weaving the cobweb.

The Spider holds a Silver Ball
In unperceived Hands -
And dancing softly to Himself
His Yarn of Pearl - unwinds - Vol. II, 605

The spider is an artist in the true sense of the word, for it feels the joy of creation and dances to itself while it works. It is significant to note that in admiring the artistry of the spider, Emily Dickinson has not commented on the insidious craft of the spider which, according to the traditional view, is involved in a sinister strategy against other smaller insects. Unlike Robert Frost who saw a dark design,[4] not of the spider only, in its ostensibly harmless activity in a sequestered and dingy corner, she is closer to Thomas Gray who compared himself to a spider in his creative activity.[5] In a light-hearted mood, however, she speaks of a spider which assiduously crawled on her reticence and took possession of her abode in such a manner that she felt like a visitor. She would have returned the blow if struck in the street or would have had recourse to law if her property was usurped. But what action could she take against the spider?

But what redress can be
For an offence nor here nor there. Vol.II, 1167

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4 The allusion is to Robert Frost's sonnet, "Design", where the spider and its web are symbolical of the dark forces operating in the world.

5 "I am a sort of spider"; wrote Thomas Gray, "and have little else to do but spin it over again or creep to some other place and spin there."

There are many creatures whom Emily Dickinson disapproves. The frog is one of them, whose "long sigh" makes the ear desire inordinately "for corporal release" (Vol.III, 1356). The frog is the orator of April, whose eloquence is a bubble and who raises on a log to make statements. If applauded, this Greek orator, Demosthenes, disappears in green water. In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson disparrages fame and uses the simile of the frog for the purpose.

> How dreary- to be Somebody!
> How public - like a Frog -
> To tell your name - the livelong June -
> To an admiring Bog! Vol.I, 288

Similarly, she disapproved the snake and used strong words and pharases to denounce it.

> A snake is summer's treason,
> And guile is where it goes. Vol.III, 1740

She wrote one of her famous poems on snake, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass", remarkable for its desceiptive beauty. The snake is seen as a spotted shaft dividing the grass as with a comb; it is a whip-lash unbraiding in the sun.

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
> Occasionally rides -
> You may have met Him - did you not
> His notice sudden is -

The Grass divides as with a Comb
A spotted shaft is seen -
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on -

He likes a Boggy Acre
A Floor too cool for corn -
Yet when a Boy, and Barefoot -
I more than once at Noon

Have passed, I thought, a Whip lash
Unbraiding in the Sun
When stopping to secure it
It wrinkled, and was gone -

But in conclusion, the poet makes no secret of the terror she feels at the sight of a snake.

Several of Nature's People
I know, and they know me -
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality -

But never met this fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone - Vol. II, 986

She has also described a nightmare, with unmistable erotic connotations, in which the object of fear is a snake (Vol. III, 1670). The snake is the only nature's creature for which she had no sympathy and which always caused in her the painful

feeling of fear. Even when she used it as an apparent erotic symbol, she still saw it as a source of terror and disturbance. And yet, the fear of the snake did not disable her to see its sleek elegance almost in the manner of D.H.Lawrence,[6] although without his philosophical stance. It also seems to be the prototype of the infernal serpent which deceived Eve and induced her to evil which it symbolized.

There are many other creatures which may not be as hostile or inimical as a snake but which are odious enough to make the poet wonder at their utility in the otherwise benevolent cosmic order. The housefly, which "herd upon the eye" and are abhorred for their odious activity of flocking on the wall or furniture of the house, is one of such creatures (Vol. III, 1388). So is the rat.

> The Rat is the concisest Tenant.
> He pays no rent. Vol.III, 1356

There is a faintly humorous acceptance of a nuisance which "hate cannot harm" and no decree can prohibit it from its unlawful activities. Similarly, the bat is an odd creature with its wrinkled wings, unlike that of a bird, resembling a "small Umbrella quaintly halved". The quaintness of its appearance and habits makes the poet wonder if it has been

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6 The allusion is to D.H.Lawrences poem, "The Snake", where he admiringly describes the beauty and elegance of the snake in its movement as it comes to quench its thirst.

created by "astute hands" or simply by "malignity" (Vol. III, 1575). There is also the angle worm which seems altogether useless till a bird advances to breakfast on it (Vol. II, 885).

Emily Dickinson made one of the insignificant creatures, the cricket, a vehicle of her highly sophisticated perception of the change of season - the transition from summer to autumn. The time indicated by the poem is late summer, long after the birds arrive, and the change is signalled by the sad song of the crickets. The poem, however, uses liturgical terminology to give it an unexpected depth of connotation.

Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass

No Ordinance be seen
So gradual the Grace
A pensive Custom it becomes
Enlarging Loneliness

Antiquest felt at Noon
When August burning low
Arise this spectral Canticle
Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace
No Furrow on the Glow
Yet a Druidic Difference
Enhances Nature now Vol. II, 1068

On the obvious level of meaning, the poem renders the perception of seasonal transition. The change has not yet taken place; only its tentative approach is felt. With the passage of summer, the crickets (a minor nation) seem to participate in a memorial ritual and sing in a chorus of pensive notes too soft to be obtrusive. It is a rite (ordinance) unseen by the human eye and the melancholy prayer (Grace) rises so slowly and gradually that it only enhances the feeling of loneliness in those who are attentive enough to listen to it. Loneliness is enlarged by the sadness of the song and also from a sense of separateness and non-participation in the memorial ritual. In fact the sadness and the loneliness thus experienced, make the noon feel unfamiliar and strange like antiquity (antiquest) as this sacred and, since the singers are not seen, spectral song rises typifying the quiet and tranquillity of late August and also inducing a feeling of repose in the listener. The favours of summer have not yet diminished and the sunshine (glow) has not yet been cut down by long shadows (Furrow) but as imperceptible difference (Druidic Difference) is felt by those who can feel it. It is this difference which adds to the sometimes unfelt majesty of nature.

The poem, however, is more complicated than the above explication makes it. Mass is both a memorial service and a sacrament of resurrection, the "unobtrusive Mass" of the insects indicates the sacrificial death of summer, its "repose" in winter, and its cyclic regeneration in spring. By association

these are the feelings suggested by "Pathetic", "pensive", and "loneliness". Or, it may be the approaching death of vegetation and insects and the song of the crickets indicate the long, undisturbed repose that lies ahead in winter. The generative principle of repose and loneliness is the approach of the gloomy autumn and bleak winter. The connotation of the religious terms, used in the poem, thus heighten the effect of the poem in accurate rendering of the elusive perception of the transitional blank often felt in late summer.

III

From the preceding discussion it emerges that Emily Dickinson's persistent refusal to see nature as a divine analogy or Emersonian "correspondence", gave her original scope for delineation and speculation. The processes of nature presented to her a carnival of everchanging entertainment which she captured in memorable words, often surcharged with elegant and refined wit. In the spectacle of nature, she often picked up objects to use them as metaphors for crystallizing umperceived truths. In this creative process of perception and communication, however, there are two attitudes worth our attention. Firstly, she saw natural phenomena predominantly in human forms, or having human attributes or characteristics of articles known to be in human use.The spring

thus becomes in her delightful rendering the unexpected maid, embarrased but certainly not afraid, whom she meets in her garden. The apple tree waits like a Venetian, the breezes sweep the vale like housewives, the woods and hills stand like a regiment of soldiers, the frost is a seducer and a thief, the morning is a queen, the sun is a king, the orchard sparkles like a Jew, the day undresses as a lady, the mountain sits upon his tremendous chair like a magistrate, a bird appears like a brigadier, the sky feels insulted at the temerity of the birds, the butterfly is an aristocratic lady, the frog is the Greek orator, Demosthenes, the lightening is the yellow fork dropped from the table of heaven and so on. One could multiply the examples by thousands extending to almost every object of nature. This mode of her description gives a sense of intimacy and familiarity which even the romantics and transcendentalists could not achieve. This is all the more surprizing for, unlike her predecessors and contemporaries, she maintained that nature and man were separate entities and any facile merger of the two would be fallacious. Strangely enough too, the Wordsworthian and Emersonian Nature, in spite of all philosophizing, remains distant, even when it is made to sympathize with human thought and emotion.

Emily Dickinson's attitude of seeing nature in human figures also revives the ancient tradition of the description of nature in the Rig Veda. This is not to say that she was

aware of the poetic mode of the Rig Veda or to suggest that her poems, like the hymns of the Rig Veda, are ecstatic religious chants of nature-worship. Emily Dickinson did not even remotely seem to have any religious reverence for nature. It was sheer coincidence that she saw natural phenomena in human terms and even when parallelism is frowned upon by scholars, a brief quotation from the Rig Veda is an irresistible temptation to illustrate the similarity.

> The day draws in, night spreads her wings,
> The goddess with a thousand eyes
> Adorned in star - embroidered robe.
>
> Queenly, majestic, she dispels
> Her younger sister's rosy tint
> The gloaming pales before the night.
>
> (Evening song from the Vedic lyrics).

If given Dickinsonian notation, the unsuspecting reader may believe it to be one of her poems.

Secondly, Emily Dickinson has written a large number of poems in glowing similies and metaphors, as her tribute to the sun or sunrise. In this respect too, her poetry bears a striking resemblence with the tributes to sunrise in Rig Veda. The roseate dawn in the Rig Veda is transfigured to a rosy fingered maid, fair Usha, the loveliest and daintiest of all the maiden deities.

Sweetly you smile, O goddess fair,
Disclosing all your youthful grace,
Your bosom bright, your radiant face,
The lustre of your golden hair.

So shines a fond and winning bride
Who robes her form in brilliant guise
And to her lord's admiring eyes
Displays her charms (Vedic lyric on Ushas)

This brief quotation has both the attitudes of Emily Dickinson: it presents light in human form and also pays tribute to the sunrise. In more than a hundred lyrics in Rig Veda, the adoration of Ushas finds ecstatic expression, beginning with

Idam srestham jyotisham joytir agat.
(Your light has come, of all the lights the fairest)

and continues:

Fair Ushas, though through years untold
You have lived on, yet you are born
Anew on each succeeding morn,
And so you are both young and old

Their round our generations run,
The old depart, and in their place
Springs ever up a younger race,
While you, immortal dawn, look on

(Vedic lyric on Ushas)

Thus we see that Emily Dickinson's nature poetry, in rejecting the immediate tradition prevailing in her times, unconsciously goes back to the ancient poetic mode of the Rig Veda. It may be of no consequence to the western reader who may, perhaps, vaguely recall only Dante's tribute to the sun in Divine Comedy, but Emily Dickinson establishes an immediate rapport with the Indian reader.

Chapter - VI

LOVE

Emily Dickinson wrote more than a hundred poems on love. An overwhelming majority of them were written during the years 1861-1863. With the passage of time, the stream of her inspiration seems to have dwindled into an insignificant trickle and except for one poem written in 1876, she altogether banished love from her poetry after 1866 (Vol.III, 1383). This fact is significant in itself; it is more so for the critics of the twentieth century who believe that the poet is the poetry[1] and that the experience of the poet is the fountainhead of all his creative writing. There is also the modern prejudice that virgins, unless they had the requisite experience, know too little to write poetry,[2] particularly love poetry which, by its very nature, is emotional, subjective and private. Emily Dickinson was a Victorian in a puritan New England and in matters of love, without the freedom we have taken for granted in our day; she was also a virgin. The virgins of her generation, with their pinched and pale faces, had known only severe

1 Interpretations of American Literature, Ed.Charles Feidelson, (New York, 1959), p. 202.

2 Ibid., p. 202.

self-denial and repression.[3] Except for the years of adolescenthood, she lived in austere seclusion, declining in later years to meet even intimate friends. These startling facts about her lead us to the inevitable question: where did she get the experience to write these love poems?

This question stares the reader in the face and many biographers in their effort to find a convincing answer, have made the life of Emily Dickinson an unconvincing mystery and an unresolved controversy. There is some justice in Professor Allen Tate's complaint that scholars have felt only biographical curiosity about her.[4] In a survey course at Harvard, I heard an amazing theory being propounded with considerable gusto that Emily Dickinson suffered, inadvertently perhaps, from father fixation and that explained her love for men much older than herself - one of them being her father's friend - with whom marriage was an impossibility. I do not know if such wild speculations have been made in print in the United States. To the best of my knowledge, no great harm has been done by the Freudian critic so far but who knows the day he may pounce upon and mangle a precious life.

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3 This statement is in relation to their personal life, particularly to their sex-life. Otherwise, virgins and spinsters were accepted in puritan society and had respectable status in the households of their parents and were active in the religious life organised by the Church. Socially, they were never looked down upon by others.

4. Interpretation of American Literature, See Allen Tate's essay, "Emily Dickinson", p. 202.

It is time we try to answer the question as best we can with the available evidence. The first to attract Emily Dickinson's attention was a law student in her father's office, Benjamin Franklin Newton. He was a Unitarian who stirred in her an undaunted intellectual independence and stimulated her aesthetic sensibility.[5] His premature death prevented her friendship from developing into love and it is fairly safe to presume that her relationship with him was that of a devoted pupil and a sympathetic teacher.[6] This fact is proved by her letters in which she always refers to him as "friend", "tutor" and "preceptor". Her affectionate inquiries about him after his death do not betray any deep emotion which she otherwise would have felt.[7] Moreover, no love poem exists to commemorate her friendship with Newton, nor one was written till six years after his death in 1860. But by that time she had fallen in love with Rev. Charles Wadsworth.[8]

Rev. Charles Wadsworth was a presbyterian minister in Philadelphia and was locally famous as a pulpit orator for the

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5 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p.72.

6 Ibid., p. 72. Her letter to Reverend Edward Everett Hale, quoted by Jay Leyda, Vol. I, pp. 158, reads: "... Of all these things he spoke - he taught me of them all, earnestly, tenderly, and when he went from us, it was as an elder brother, loved indeed very much, and mourned, and remembered".

7 Letters, Vol. I, L.153, pp. 282-283.

8 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 56, 77-83.

brillance and intensity of his utterance. Perhaps, she went to hear him preach.[9] Her own religious thinking at that time had not crystallized into a set of stable beliefs. In spite of her rejection of orthodoxy, the core of her religious thinking derived from the puritan tradition of the Valley which held, apart from other things, that man was a dependent creature whose intuitions were profoundly untrustworthy. She had longed for belief, not as a matter of conformity with the members of her family who were deeply religious, but as a healing balm for her anguished and truthful soul. Wadsworth held almost the same belief as her father and it was quite plausible that he preached on a subject dear to her. It is equally safe to conjecture that he made an abiding impression on her. Once we concede this much, it is not difficult to understand how her admiration for him developed into devoted love.

But her love for him was not of the common sort and it would be a fallacy to describe her relationship with him by the trite phrase "love affair". If love it was, it was a hopeless and one-sided love which did not experience fulfilment even in an embrace. One doubts if Wadsworth even knew it.[10] There is no proof, conclusive or fragmentary, that the three love

9 Ibid., p. 76.

10 Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home, (New York, 1955), pp. 369-372. The letter from Wadsworth to Emily Dickinson begins with "My Dear Miss Dickinson" and is manifestly from a pastor concerned about the spiritual well-being of Emily Dickinson. It also expresses hope that she would confide further if he can lessen the anguish of her spirit.

letters in rough draft found in her papers after her death, were ever sent to him.[11] Wadsworth was married and had four children. She must have known that it would be highly indiscreet to unburden the agonising secret of her heart. She decided to suffer in silence and her love for him remained a closely guarded secret all her life. In the absence of any precise evidence, one may question the validity of the belief that those love poems, at least some of the best known ones, were written about Wadsworth. There is, however, a group of poems about which there can be no doubt. The news of Wadsworth's acceptance of a call to the Calvary Church in San Francisco was received by her with a sense of crisis and it is from this time onwards that she mentions Calvary in her love poems. In 1862 alone, this name appears in ten poems.[12] In 1863, she began one of her incomplete poems in rough draft with the moving lines: "Where thou art - that is Home / Cashmere or Calvary - the same..." (Vol.II, 725).

It was sometime after this event that she adopted her "white election" and began to dress in immaculate white. She also withdrew from life to concentrate on her poetry. This withdrawl is often referred to as "renunciation" and she has used this word once herself (Vol.II, 745). But it would be misleading to use the word renunciation in this context.

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11 Letters, Vol.II, see letter No. 187, 233, 248.

12 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp.81-82. In some of these poems she speaks of herself as Queen of Calvary and Empress of Calvary.

Renunciation means giving up or sacrificing what one has. Emily Dickinson had nothing to renounce. A girl of plain features and modest charms, she had waited, like other girls of all times, for the prince charming till she was over thirty years old but he did not oblige. In one of her letters she wrote:[13]

> "In such a procelain life one likes to be sure that all is well lest one stumble upon one's hopes in a pile of broken crockery."

But she realised that she had stumbled. It is to her credit that after her disappointment, she did not go on hoping against hope. She was aware of her talent as a poet and she gathered her forces for writing poetry with single-minded devotion. It was a conscious and deliberate choice and any sympathy for her life-long solitude would be misplaced. If she was lonely, it was a loneliness she shared with all great artists of the world.

Commenting on this aspect of her life, Professor Allen Tate has observed.[14]

> "When she went upstairs and closed the door, she mastered life by rejecting it. Others in their way had done it before; still others did it later... Mastery of the world by rejecting the world was the doctrine, even if it was not always the practice of

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13 Letters, Vol.II, L.193, p.338. The quotation is from a letter to Samuel Bowles.

14 Interpretations of American Literature, p.202.

> Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather. It is the meaning of fate in Hawthorne; his people are fated to withdraw from the world and to be destroyed. And it is one of the great themes of Henery James".

This is a very significant statement as it reveals one of the paradoxes of Emily Dickinson's life. One may add further that she rejected the belief of the transcendentalists in the divine nature of intuition and also the doctrine that man was the source of moral law. But like Emerson and Thoreau she believed in the self-reliance of the individual to improve his nature through his own efforts. She also refused to accept the orthodoxies preached by Jonathan Edwards but saw like him that through suffering and toil one must achieve his cherished ideal.

> Each - It's difficult Ideal
> Must achieve - Iteslf -
> Through the solitary prowess
> Of a Silent life. Vol.II, 750

Again, she believed as an artist that her response to experience could best be realised in the rarefied private world of her own where human encounters did not blunt the edge of her sensitive soul.

> The Soul's Superior instants
> Occur to Her - alone -
> When friend - and Earth's occasion
> Have infinite withdrawn - Vol. I, 306

This may not be good poetry but she states her case very clearly. "The soul selects her own society", she observed in one of her famous love poems, "then shuts the door" (Vol. I, 303). In another poem, she repeats the idea:

> The Soul that hath a Guest
> Doth seldom go abroad -
> Diviner Crowd at Home -
> Obliterate the need - Vol. II, 674

To a life of humdrum routine, she preferred the life in the world of her imagination where she could live with greater fullness and intensity than was otherwise possible.

Professor Allen Tate has denied the influence of Emily Dickinson's love for Wadsworth on her poetry and writes:[15]

> "It is dangerous to assume that her 'life' which to the biographer means the thwarted love affair she is supposed to have had, gave to her poetry a decisive direction. It is even more dangerous to suppose that it made her a poet."

It is difficult to agree with this statement without qualifying it. Perhaps, this could be said with a fair amount of accuracy that her love for Otis Lord had practically no influence on her poetry. Coming as it did when she was in her late forties, it had a certain measure of fulfilment which was denied to her in

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15 Interpretations of American Literature, p. 201.

her earlier love. But by this time her creative activity had almost ceased. She did not write a single love poem during the years she was in love with him unless the three undated love poems could be proved to belong to this period (Vol. III, 1664, 1736, 1743). All these poems, however, are similar in theme and refer to the deprivation caused by separation. The emotion expressed thus has no direct relevance to the nature of her relationship with Lord.

But it would be misleading to suggest that her first love experience was of similar nature. There is unmistakable evidence to prove that her love for Wadsworth deepened her sympathy and stimulated her creative activity. No doubt love affairs do not make poets and, as Professor Tate observes, it would be wrong to believe that she would have not been a poet without this experience. She was a poet before she fell in love but considering the amazingly large number of poems she composed after 1860, one cannot fail to notice the sudden blossoming of her genius as a poet. Besides, all her best love poems belong to this period. Even in poems where the personal merges into the universal, the blurred identity of her hopeless love unfailingly remains. We do not know of any other event which might have given impetus to her creative energy, for her life was singularly uneventful. The only other possible explanation could be that by this time she had gained confidence as an artist but it does not explain why her newly gained artistic

maturity failed to maintain a steady output over the years to come. It may be a strange coincidence but her creative impulse came to her as a tide and receded soon after the crisis in the affairs of her heart had subsided to a life-long yearning.

I do not know if "thwarted" is the word to describe her first experience of love. Any girl in her place would have known that her love was hopeless from the very start. To fall in love with a married man is one thing; to cherish a love which is not even mutual is altogether a different matter. The desire to love and to be loved is universal enough but to love without the desire to be loved, is a situation which the western mind is not likely to understand readily. It may appear enigmatic and if Freudian theories are pressed into service for explanation, it may appear neurotic. Neurosis in psycho-analytical terminology is a convenient handle to explain every thing which does not conform to the conventional pattern. But such love is known to have existed in the Orient and has found expression in our literatures of the vernacular. Perhaps, Emily Dickinson herself never sought fulfilment of her love. In one of her poems she speaks characteristically of "sights ineffable disgrace" which stains "adoration" (Vol. III, 1429). In another poem she observes:

> I'd rather recollect a setting
> Than own a rising sun ... Vol.III, 1340

She wrote to Higginson in the same mood when she said: "To escape enchantment, one must always flee",[16] and again, "Emblem is immeasurable - that is why it is better than Fulfilment, which can be drained".[17] It is interesting to repeat a sentence which Professor Johnson has quoted from Ellen Glasgow's autobiography in this context. "It is the law of woman's nature that the memory of longing survives the more fugitive memory of fulfilment."[18] In the light of these statements one cannot but cohclude that Emily Dickinson consciously endeavoured to preserve the freshness of her dream rather than see the reality. What she needed in life was a preceptor and a muse whom she could adore with physical passion in her imagination.[19] Viewed otherwise her love poems lose their abiding significance.

II

The first, which is also incidentally the largest group of her love poems, is dedicatory and repeatedly expresses her devotion and loyalty to her lover to make assurance, as it were, doubly sure. These declarations of love were not meant to be

16 Letters, Vol. II, p. 454.
17 Letters, Vol.III, p. 773.
18 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 63.
19 Ibid., p. 80.

communicated to the object of her love; they occur in their varying degree for her own relief and satisfaction. Her ability to observe accurately was not confined to the world outside herself; her remote and solitary existence also enabled her to analyse emotion and to observe the complex shades of her own thought and feeling. This explains her detachment which she conspicuously maintains even when she is writing about her purely subjective experience. In one of her letters she describes the upheaval of a change of residence.[20]

> "I took at the time a memorandum of my several senses, and also of my hat and coat, and my best shoes - but it was lost in the melee, and I am out with lanterns looking for myself."

Even when we think that the turn of phrase in this sentence is rather fanciful, it expresses an attitude of the poet. Her gift to transcend the circumscribed self and take stock of herself as if she were some other person, makes her love poems effectively convincing and saves them from degenerating into sentimental effusions. In one of her early poems, she adopts the impersonal third person to describe what apparently is her own nervous confusion at meeting her lover face to face. "The Rose did caper on her cheek - Her Boddice rose and fell -/" Her speech staggers like drunken men and her fingers fumble at needle work (Vol.I, 208). Such intensity of emotion is the

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20 Letters, Vol. II, p. 323-324.

prerogative of a pure heart at its first encounter with love; it is not that the emotion is in excess of the situation. In another poem, she cherishes the hope of her complete identification with her lover and in all humility, necessary to deep love, makes note of the fact that she would be "the smaller of the two", and like the self-sacrificing bride of the Orient, she says with infinite tenderness:

> Forever of His fate to taste -
> If grief - the largest part -
> If joy - to put my piece away
> For that beloved Heart — Vol. I, 208

Again, she repeats the idea in another poem that she would give her life and all that is precious to her "to see his face" and then jokingly asks:

> Now - have I bought it -
> "Shylock"? Say!
> Sign me the bond — Vol. I, 273

The wit in the unexpected comparison of "The beloved Heart" to Shylock is a characteristic which we associate with metaphysical poets and of that I shall speak later.

She never tires of expressing her love and explores in minute details the various aspects of her love. Her diction changes and keeps pace with the variation of her mood. His Love envelopes her life and as a dedicated soul, she must decline

the invitations from others as they come (Vol.I, 273). God would be content with a fraction of the life she poured to him and she "ceded all of Dust I knew." (Vol.I, 275). As the drop of water loses its identity ("locality") in the sea, she would lose her in him (Vol.I, 293). She would carry his face with her when she goes "out of time" (Vol.I, 336). Walls would be no barrier to her and even if the "universe" was one solid rock, she would "tunnel" at "his silver call" for the recompense to look "in his eyes" (Vol.I, 398). As the moon leads the sea like a docile boy, she wishes to be guided by "the Amber Hand". She loved him as well as Jesus loved men (Vol.I, 451). His love came to her like fire and made "her house" glow in its radiant light; it was like the sunrise, with the sky

> Impanelled from no summer brief -
> With limit of Decay -
> 'T was Noon - without the News of Night -
> Nay, Nature, it was Day Vol.II, 638

Then in a moment of intense longing she says that she would be contented if, like a stranger in "an ungracious" country, he paused at her door for a short while and if she was permitted to be the housewife in the cottage he lived (Vol. II, 961).

These are the everchanging shades of her devoted love as she writes about it. Perhaps, these poems would have been different if they had been written to make her love known. The

fact that they were like unposted love letters committed to the unknown hands of posterity, gave her freedom to dwell with loving care, sometimes in unfinished and partially realised poems, on the myriad facets of her love. The picture of her that emerges through these poems is that of a shy, modest and self-effacing girl who was willing to sacrifice all that she had on the altar of love and who needed only a little sunshine to make her happy. But fate had ordained otherwise. The pilgrim of eternity was destined to walk alone and to sing as she went. She had known the radiance of the day, free from the lurking dusk of the evening, but it was not given to her to dwell in the glowing light longer than she did. Separation fell like a shadow and curtained her unrealised dream. Thus benighted, she wrote with assured competence her love poems of sorrow. She wrote in one of her letters:[21]

> "I had a terror - since September - I could tell to none - and so I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground - because I am afraid."

It was unimportant to remember the man who was the occasion of these poems; it would matter little if he did not exist at all, for these poems of sorrow continue one of the poignant themes of English and American poetry - unrequited love.

The first poem of this group was written in 1862 after

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21 Letters, Vol. II, p. 404.

Wadsworth had left for San Francisco. Emily Dickinson thought that Nature would be different after the crisis and sympathise with the "Queen of Calvary", as she called herself. But everything was as usual except herself who alone felt the loss (Vol.II, 620). She had hoped that the robin, the daffodils, the grass and the bees would not come with the summer but

> They're here, though; not a creature failed -
> No Blossom stayed away
> In gentle deference to me -
> The Queen of Calvary - Vol.I, 348

In her despair, she asks the rose not to scatter its colour and sweetness as she has lost the capacity to enjoy them.

> Globe Roses - break their satin flake -
> Upon my Garden floor -
> Yet - thou - not there -
> I had as lief they bore
> No Crimson - more - Vol.I, 399

She grieves at the propoect and wonders what she would do when the roses blossom and birds fly in the maple tree, or,

> Oh, when the squirrel fills His Pockets
> And the Berries stare
> How can I bear their jocund Faces
> Thou from Here, so far? Vol.II, 956

She did not know nor anybody in her position would have known the answer.

After being disappointed by the indifference of Nature to her suffering, she turns to analyse the blinding grief of separation. She found it so intense that she had to feel her life with both her hands "to see if it was there" (Vol.I, 351). She had put away his life as an "ornament too grand" for her but the agonizing possibility haunts her that

> This might have been the Hand
> That sowed the flower, he preferred -
> Or smoothed a homely pain,
> Or pushed the pebble from his path -
> Or played his chosen tune. Vol.I, 366

Realising that the gulf which separates them cannot be bridged, she envies those who have physical proximity to him. She envies the sea and the "spokes of wheels of chariots" on which he rides and those who "gaze" on his journey. She envies the light that wakes him "And Bells - that boldly ring / To tell Him it is Noon, abroad -" (Vol.I, 498).She writes about her unhappiness again and again as in the poem where she laments that "for Barefoot Vision", he shut her out from his life (Vol.II, 523). She also comments on the permanence of her love; she adjusted her being, carved his name upon it, then exiled herself in the "East" (Vol.II, 603). She comes to the sad conclusion that bliss in life is a "fiction" which seems plausible but is not real (Vol.II, 646). To die for him was easier than to live unhappily without him, which includes the "dying multifold"

without the respite granted to the dead (Vol.II, 1013). She also states the reason why they must remain apart, at least in this life, and says that they could suffice for each other but "hesitating fractions" tore them asunder (Vol.II, 643). Again, the fulfilment of their love was interdict of God and their separation was preordained (Vol.II, 1088).

In such a hopeless situation, the only hope that was left to her was that she would achieve after her death what she had failed to accomplish in life. Such a hope is common enough and has become almost a human weakness which all the religions of the world have exploited in promising the bounties of God denied to man in worldly existence. One wonders how the allurements of the next world have lightened the burden of many a man and woman and they have borne cheerfully the misery of this world in the hope of getting a recompense in the next. Emily Dickinson was no exception in this respect. She cautiously mentions the possibility of her achieving "victory" in one of her poems. She struggles hard to cross the barriers in her path of love and finds her horizon blocked. She promises her feet "the Grace in Sight" but they fail and she wonders if death would prove to be a victory in reverse.

> They strive - and yet delay -
> They perish - Do we die -
> Or is this Death's Experiment -
> Reversed - in Victory? Vol.II, 550.

In the next stage, she thinks of the joy she would feel at meeting him after life, which was worse than death, and tell him how she felt without him at midnight when all the clocks of the world had seemed to have stopped, leaving the night colder than it was. She would tell him how she kept the pretence of a smile to show him after they waded through the deep of separation and met after death (Vol.II, 577). Finally, in two of her poems, termed as "bridal poems", she expresses her conviction that after a long parting, she would meet him "before the judgement seat of God" where she would be eternally united with him. She muses if any marriage could be like that, with God as the host in paradise and cherubims and seraphims as the "unobtrusive Guest" (Vol.II, 625). She also thinks of grave as the little cottage where, like a bride, she keeps "the parlor ready", lays "marble tea" for him and waits to be united in everlasting life (Vol.III, 1743).

As she realised that she was not cast for a life of worldly happiness and contentment, her acceptance of the inevitable urged her to write what are known as the poems of renunciation. If renunciation it was, its aim was to give up even the desire of the fulfilment of her love from the very beginning and she always deemed the object of her love farther than the moon or star where she could never reach (Vol.I, 338). She consoles herself with the idea that he exists somewhere in silence to surprise her later but also expresses the fear that "the play" may prove too costly and death may intervene to

deprive her of the "bliss" of meeting (Vol.I, 338). Finally she accepts her fate, adopting her "white election" (Vol.II, 528).

> And wear - if God should count me fit -
> Her blameless mystery - Vol.I, 271

She points out further that sages had called this life of seclusion "small" but in spite of her initial misgivings, she had found it vast as horizon. As the years went by, she gained self-control and she could hear his name without "That Stop - sensation - on my soul -/ And Thunder - in the Room" (Vol.I, 293). She goes a step further to assert that she could not live with him because that would be life and

> So we must meet apart -
> You there - I - here
> With just the Door ajar. Vol.II, 640

As a consequence of this seclusion, she took refuge in the world of her imagination and sought the things which were denied to her in life. This withdrawl into the cloudland of her dreams was the reflex action of her self-denial. She had closed the "doors" of her soul and jammed the "valves" of her attention only to escape in a larger world where she had a greater measure of freedom to live her dreams. It was necessary for her to imagine her dreams come true to preserve their freshne

and enchantment and also to protect her from becoming morbid. In such a world, she lives with him and he presents an invisible claim on her, though no wedlock was granted to her. "I live with Him - I hear His Voice -/ I stand alive - Today -" (Vol.I, 463). She also believes "That life like This - is stopless/", whatever may be the verdict of others. It is so because she can see him better in the darkness of the intervening years and her lively imagination has dispensed with reality.

> What need of Day -
> To Those whose Dark - hath so - surpassing Sun -
> It deem it be - Continually -
> At the Meridian? Vol.II, 611

She even wishes to "play Yesterday" and become a girl at school again, though she doubts if it was possible and asks if the lark could go back to the "shell" after he had soared in the sky, and if he did, would the new imprisonment not hurt him? Finally, she hears his voice at her door asking the servant for her and she takes a flower as she goes to meet him, for he had not seen her "in this life". They walk and a tender, thoughtful moon goes with them. The meeting is over but she would sacrifice her blood - "purple - in my Vein" - to live that hour again (Vol.II, 663).

Her deep sorrow in love gave her the necessary insight to analyse pain and she wrote two poems to give it poetic utterance.

It is a well-known psychological truth that one loses perspective in intense and prolonged suffering. The pangs of grief hurt and are accountable in time only in their newness. Their continuation creates a blank in which the awareness of time is lost. This sophisticated idea is expressed with admirable precision in one of her poems.

> Pain - has an Element of Blank -
> It cannot recollect
> When it began - or if there were
> A time when it was not - Vol.II, 650

Similarly, the nerves are stunned after a tragic crisis and the soul lies in a trance without being able to remember the distinctive features of daily existence. The sufferer moves mechanically as one does in somnambulism and goes through the daily routine of life without living them. This psychological truth finds expression in what I believe to be one of the finest poems of the English language.

> After great pain, a formal feeling comes -
> The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs -
> The stiff Heat questions was it He, that bore,
> And Yesterday, or Centuries before
>
> The Feet, mechanical, go round -
> A Wooden way
> Of Ground, or Air, or Ought -
> Regardless grown,
> A Quartz contentment, like a stone -

This is the Hour of Lead -
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow -
First - Chill - then Stupor - then the letting go -
Vol.I, 341

The imagery in this poem is controlled by the central idea expressed in the first line. The stunning effect of grief is suggested by the words "formal", "ceremonious", "tombs", "stiff", "mechanical", "wooden", "regardless", "chill", "stupor", and the "letting go". The image of persons frozen to death, who feel the chill, then stupor them the letting go, is a close analogy of the experience of intense suffering. The outer form of the poem which maintains the funeral image in its three stages of death, procession and burial, is shaped by the inner mood of the poem and the use of exact rhyme in the last two lines of each stanza adds to its technical excellence. The heaviness of pain is suggested by the words "bore", "quartz", "stone" and finally "lead". The pain described in both these poems is not necessarily one caused by disappointment in love; it is universalised by the use of the abstract noun.

III

There are also moments when Emily Dickinson forgot the suffering of her heart and wrote in a light mood.She unhesitatingly laughed at herself or made fun of love. This ability to see the comic aspects of an emotion in which she was deeply involved, is a sure indication of her genius as a poet. A lesser artist

would have never climbed the abysmal depth to be in the sunshine for a while. Such moods do not constitute a negation of the predominance of a sense of deprivation in her love poems; they add to its poignancy and provide a refreshing change. One of her poems, begins cheerfully:

> Is Bliss then, such Abyss,
> I must not put my foot amiss
> For fear I spoil my shoe? Vol.I, 34

Another poem opens with the question.

> "Why do I love" You, Sir?

She answers indirectly by saying that the wind does not require the grass to say why "she" cannot keep her place when "he" passes and that the lightening does not ask the eye why it shut in "his" presence (Vol.I, 480). It is a pleasant manner of saying that her love for him was inevitable and needed no interrogation as it was almost elemental. Again, in a very amusing poem, she declares that she would gladly be anything he desired to win his love. She would be tall as stag or small as wren to suit him and if she was assured of his love, she would not hesitate to transform herself into rhinoceros or even a mouse (Vol.I,480).

Closely resembling in mood, are the poems in which her attitude is similar to that of the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century England. The love poems of Donne and Marvel are enlivened with wit, by the unexpected turn of phrase or

argument or by their startling discovery of the similarity between two or more apparently dissimilar things. The metaphysical conceit, which they used lavishly in their poetry, is distinguished by being far-fetched and witty and gives a precision and pointedness to their utterance. Emily Dickinson did not consciously employ this artifice in her poetry but there are occasional flashes of great beauty. In one of her poems, she contrasts the merit of her lover with her own unworthiness and fears that she may prove to be insufficient for him. But in a sudden shift of thought she cleverly argues that a thing high must necessarily recline on something low,

> For nothing higher than Itself
> Itself can rest upon - Vol.II, 751

Again, in a metaphysical conceit she compares her life to a loaded gun.

> My Life had stood - a Loaded Gun -
> In Corners - till a Day
> The Owner passed - indentified -
> And carried Me away - Vol.II, 754

The extended metaphor is maintained as she points out that the mountains resound when she speaks for him and when she smiles with her "Vesuvian face", the valley glows with "cordial light". At night, she guards him and is a deadly foe to his enemies who cannot stir the second time once she lays on him "a Yellow

Eye" or "an emphatic Thumb". The poem ends, however, on a different note and amuses by the sudden shift of thought.

> For I have but the power to kill,
> Without - the power to die - Vol.II,754

In a similar poem, she begins rather grandly that his "moon" fills or diminishes at her command and at her bidding it shines in the sky or hides behind the clouds. But, she observes in the concluding lines, as they hold a "Mutual Disc" and face a "Mutual Day":

> Which is the Despot, neither knows -
> Nor Whose - the Tyranny - Vol.II, 909

In two of her poems, Emily Dickinson employed sexual imagery with amazing candour and in complete disregard of the taboo on such subjects in her day. About one of them, Colonel Higginson, at the time he and Mrs.Todd were making selections for the poems 1891, wrote:[22]

> "One poem only I dread a little to print - that wonderful "Wild Nights" - lest the malignant read into it more than that virgin recluse ever dreamed of putting there. Has Miss Lavinia any shrinking about it? You will understand and paradon my solicitude. Yet what a loss to omit it! Indeed it is not to be omitted."

The argument of the poem is that a stormy night would become

22 Quoted by Thomas H.Johnson as a footnote to poem number 249 in The Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Vol.I, p.180.

a luxury if she were with him, for "a heart in port" has no need of sailor's compass or chart and the howling winds outside can do no harm. The poem ends suggestively:

> Rowing in Eden -
> Ah, the Sea!
> Might I but moor - Tonight -
> In Thee! Vol.I, 249

The second poem describes the experience of the previous night when someone tried "to twine" thinking her tired or lonely but she turned "ducal"; for a small boat ("brig") one port was sufficient. The poem concludes with the lines:

> Our's be the tossing - wild though the sea -
> Rather than a Mooring - unshared by thee.
> Our's be the Cargo - unladen - here
> Rather than the "spicy isles"
> And thou - not there - Vol.I, 368

Commenting on the second poem, Professor Johnson writes:[23]

> "The slow regularity of the beginning is speeded up at the end of the second stanza. The third stanza opens with a panting dactyl that slows to a quiet measure, shortened, in the last line, to two feet. The imagery throughout is unmistakably concrete."

It hardly needs to be pointed out that the adjective "wild" is

23 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 99.

used significantly - for nights in the first and sea in the second poem - to suggest the disturbing sexual passion. In both the poems, water imagery is maintained, for water is the symbol of fertility and is, therefore, directly linked with sex. The movement of the "panting dactyl" is also suggestive and the tranquil ending indicated the soothing contentment that follows the consumation of the sexual act. No wonder the Victorian Higginson hesitated to include this poem in his selection! Even Professor Johnson asks without answering the question: "From what experience was she enabled to give these sensations an artistic creation?"[24] The answer seems to me too obvious to need emphasis: wedlock is not the only source of sex experience and since "any creation", as Professor Johnson points out, "is a statement of something", even erotic dreams can be real enough to form the basis for such poems.[25]

Emily Dickinson's experience of love had two specific lessons for her. Love was to her like a boundless ocean which puts minor streams to rest and she, like a stream, found immense contentment in it.

> And now, I'm different from before,
> As if I breathed superior air -
> Or brushed a Royal Gown -
> My feet, too, that had wandered so -
> My Gipsy face - transfigured now -
> To Tenderer Renown - Vol.II, 506

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24 Ibid., p. 99
25 Ibid., p. 99

Love also taught her "Waiting with Myself" and "fortitude of Fate". Patience and fortitude thus acquired, gave a new dimension to her personality and she could face the future with the belief that death could not debar her further from happiness which life had done before. "Till it has loved", she wrote in a letter,[26] "no man or woman can become itself"."Love is its own rescue", she wrote again, "for we - at our supremest are but its trembling Emblems".[27] She also remarked in one of her poems that she had no time for enemity or for love but, as some work was obligatory, she accepted "The toil of love" (Vol.I, 478). It was through the experience of love that Emily Dickinson matured and explored within herself "the undiscovered continent". The voyage of discovery gave a philosophical depth to her thinking and enriched her vision of life, as it also determined her rank as a poet. She wrote in one of her poems:

> The embers of a Thousand Years
> Uncovered by the Hand
> That fondled them when they were Fire
> Will gleam and understand Vol.III, 1383

These lines could aptly be applied to her love poems. More than seventy five years after her death, they have not lost their freshness. The twentieth century reader who has been trained to admire metaphysical poetry and its continuation in

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26 Letters, Vol. II, p. 628.

27 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 594.

modern English and American poetry and who has a profound distrust for human emotion, may try to ignore them. But the "hand"that willingly tries to uncover the "embers", knows that the fire "gleams", as it also understands how rewarding such an experience is.

Chapter VII

DIVINE LOVE

It has been observed earlier, in the discussion of Emily Dickinson's love poems, that the identity of the object of her love is very often blurred and it becomes increasingly difficult to co-relate her love poems to the meagre biographical details that have come down to posterity. The process of identification is further complicated when the profane and the divine love are merged into an abstraction which can be interpreted both ways. In commenting upon the Calvary poems, one can say with reasonable assurance that some of them are related to her agonizing sense of nonfulfilment in love, or when she says,

> Where thou art - that is Home
> Cashmere or Calvary - the same Vol.II, 725

one can safely conclude that she expresses earthly or profance love in these lines and that the allusion, perhaps, is to Charles Wadsworth whose acceptance of the call to Calvary Church in San Francisco, created a crisis in Emily Dickinson's life. But such an assurance is fairly damaged, if not altogether lost, when we come across such lines as:

I tend my flowers for thee -
Bright Absentee! Vol.I, 339

This is not a factual statement, as the rest of the poem may suggest, of her lonely vigil, tending the flowers in the garden, expecting her love to return home. She is talking metaphorically and the "flowers" are her own accomplishments or refinements which she prunes and improves upon in preparation for the day when she may meet her "absentee" whose image is still clear and bright in her imagination, in spite of the lapse of time. It is this intended meeting which gives to these beautiful opening lines their unique power and poignancy and, if the rest of the poem was not written, these two lines could stand as a poem complete in itself.

But who is the "Bright Absentee"? Is he an earthly lover of flesh and blood or is he Jesus Christ? The qualifying adjective "bright" is, indeed, very suggestive. Does it not indirectly refer to the bright halo around the face and head of Lord Christ? If this implication is accepted, the lines would assume a different meaning expressing divine love. Tending her flowers would then mean that she tends to whatever virtues she has or that she is in the process of removing her imperfections so that she could meet the Lord with requisite purity. In one of her bridal poems, Emily Dickinson says that she is too "spotted" or too stained with sin to be wholly worthy of being the bride of Christ (Vol.II, 964) and, more or less, the same

idea is expressed in the two lines quoted above. Human life has often been compared to a garden where one has to watch against the growth of rank weeds (vices) and to remove them whenever they show their ugly head. Similarly, the virtues are like flower plants to be tended carefully so that they could grow in freedom from the overpowering weeds. Left to itself, the exuberance of the crude forces of nature are likely to reclaim the garden and turn it into a wild patch. In a similar manner, human life is assailed with evil passions which have to be kept under strict discipline and control if virtues are to be brought in the fore-front. This view is in keeping with puritan orthodoxy from which Emily Dickinson drew her ethical and religious attitudes, even when she thought herself to be free from them. She did not believe, like the transcendentalists, in the basic goodness of man who was the source of all moral law.[1] On the contrary, she held the view that man was essentially bad and needed the rigours of discipline if he was to achieve the semblance of moral perfection in a sinful world where perfectibility of man was not possible.[2]

Another poem, variously attributed to her memory of Franklin Benjamin Newton[3] or Charles Wadsworth, has the same remarkable

1 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 233.

2 Ibid., p. 234

3 Whicher; This was a Poet, p. 94. The late Professor Whicher thinks that the poem is related to her memory of Benjamin Franklin Newton.

suggestiveness in its artistic brevity and design.

I held a Jewel in my fingers -
And went to sleep -
The day was warm, and winds were prosy -
I said "'Twill keep" -

I woke - and chid my honest fingers,
The Gem was gone -
And now, an Amethyst remembrance
Is all I own. Vol.I, 245

The factual experience of the poem, the loss of a jewel and its memory, furnishes the symbolic framework for the expression of a deeper emotion; the loss of love and its haunting remembrance to light the darkness of her remaining days. The generalised tone of the poem transcends the particular and the use of the symbol 'jewel' or 'gem' elevates the poem to the universal agony of the loss of love. In the poetry of Emily Dickinson, this is a familiar process and in all her good poems, the particularity of her experience is elevated to a realm of universal significance and establishes her artistic detachment. Indeed, this is true of all great poetry, otherwise poetic creations would have been lost in a maze of topicalities. The fact that all great poetry is not circumscribed by time and space and that it has constantly crossed the geographical limits of its origin or the barriers of its milieu, is a convincing testimony to its abiding meaningfulness. In this respect it is not at all important to know

whether the jewel referred to in the poem is Newton or Wadsrorth. What the poem recounts, is Emily Dickinson's assurance in possessing a love which she believed would survive momentary inattention (sleep) or unpredictable buffets of the prosaic wordly existence,symbolized by the 'warm day' and the 'prosy winds'. She was wrong and after the loss of her love, she chides her 'honest fingers', the source of her self assurance, but it is of no avail. Instead of love, what she 'owns' now is a vivid, rosy remembrance to remind her of her loss.

There are two words in the poem, however, which have a deeper significance. 'Sleep' may denote spiritual inactivity, induced by an increased concern for the material well being, for an excessive involvement in the prosaic, wordly existence may submerge the spiritual needs and may lead to a corresponding period of spiritual unawareness. If this is the intended meaning of the word "sleep", then the jewel is not a symbol of ordinary, earthly love but represents divine love or love for Jesus Christ. What she is bewailing, is the loss of divine love which occurred in a period of her life when she was too much engrossed with the material needs of her life, ignoring the spiritual. She had thought that the one would not exclude the other but in reality it was not so; she could not have the best of both the worlds. In her desire to return to the divine love, she chides her assurance, but realizes that she was too sullied to regain the purity of her initial love which, once lost, can never be the same again. Theologically, this

stance of the poet may seem untenable, for a sinner can always return, indeed, it is never too late to return to the bosom of the Lord. Emily Dickinson, however, was not writing a theological treatise but a poem where the loss of the purity of her love is equated with the loss of love itself. She now remembers the radiant purity of her love signified by the suggestive phrase, "amethyst rememberance".

This discussion of the earthly and divine love merging into a single poem may seem far-fetched or, at best, an unnecessary sophistication. But it is relevant to point out that Emily Dickinson attached almost the same importance to love as the mystics of the pagan tradition or of the Orient. She believed that the entire universe overflowed with love and, in its unlimited manifestation, it could not be other than divine love. The pithy utterance, in one of her poems, gives memorable expression to her belief.

> That Love is all there is,
> Is all we know of Love. Vol.III, 1765

What she says in these lines is that the all pervading force of love inheres in all the objects of this universe and gives relevance and meaning to the cosmic order. In Platonic philosophy, love is considered to be one of the attributes of the One who is the fountain-head of all life and in whom all life can exist. Emily Dickinson goes a step further and

identifies love with the Deity.

> Unable are the Loved to die
> For Love is Immortality,
> Nay, it is Deity -
>
> Unable they that love - to die
> For Love reforms Vitality
> Into Divinity. Vol.II, 809

If love is Deity, those who are loved cannot perish altogether, since they have a part of Deity in them. Similarly, the vitality of those who love, is also transformed into divinity which is not subject to death. It is obvious that she is not talking of earthly love but of love divine. The soul which is fired with such love or is the receiver of such love, which amounts to the same thing, for no one can receive unless he can give love, attains to divinity and is immortal, as it merges with the Deity.

Attaining to such a love, however, is not easy. In a poem made faintly humorous by the whimsy of her implied similies, she states that love is as high as Chimborazo peak in Ecuador which is difficult to climb all alone. It is deep like an ocean which she cannot cross by herself. Finally she concludes the poem:

> Love - thou art Vailed -
> A few - behold thee -
> Smile - and alter - and prattle - and die -
> Bliss - were an Oddity - without thee -

Nicknamed by God -
Eternity. Vol. I, 453

The face of Love is veiled and only the chosen few can see it. The vision makes them happy and alters them and, before their physical demise, they talk of love. The poet intervenes to add that happiness in life would be an oddity without love, for love is Eternity, a name (nickname) given by God.

Associated with divine love is divine beauty and Emily Dickinson endeavours to define it, as it is commonly understood.

The Love of Life can show Below
Is but a filament, I know,
Of that diviner thing
That faints upon the face of Noon -
And smites the Tinder in the Sun
And hinders Gabriel's wing -

'Tis this - in Music - hints and sways -
And far abroad on Summer days -
Distils uncertain pain -
'Tis this enamors in the East -
And tints the Transit in the West
With harrowing Iodine - Vol.II, 673

The beauty and ecstacy of earthly love is only a small particle (filament) of the supernal beauty which, according to the poet, can be perceived in "the face of the Noon". It is that beauty which strikes the tinder of the sun and makes it glow, or hinders the messenger of God, Gabriel, by its dazzling charm.

The suggestion of its presence gives rapture to music just as the human hearts are made to ache for it on summer days. The colourful glory of the sunrise and the "harrowing Iodine" of the sunset embody a part of it and derive their fascination from it. Such extensive and all-pervading beauty also inspires a love which is boundless. Such a love, by its very nature divine, also brings immense spiritual riches and as compared to it, the wealth of India, considered to be fabulous in Emily Dickinson's times, reacedes into insignificance and a wealthy man with stocks of gold appears destitute with a "stale sum".

> How destitute is he,
> Whose Gold is firm,
> Who finds it every time
> The small stale Sum -
> When Love with but a Pence
> Will so display
> As is a disrespect
> To India. Vol.III, 1477

With this exposition of Emily Dickinson's views on divine beauty and love, it is not surprising to find that she spoke of her own experience of divind love in terms of lightening and electricity In both Christianity and Islam, God is presented as a dazzling light which the human eyes cannot endure to see. According to Biblical account, St. Paul

was blinded by the flash of celestial light on the road to Damascus,[4] and according to Quranic description, Moses, insistent on seeing God, was striken unconscious by the sudden blaze of light before him.[5] In both the cases, the appearance of the heavenly flash marked the initiation into spiritual life of love and joy, and in both the cases it was the revelation of the Truth so far hidden from human eyes. Emily Dickinson's experience has similar implications, although not to the same extent as St. Paul's or Moses'.

> The farther Thunder that I heard
> Was nearer than the Sky
> And rumbles still, though torrid Noons
> Have lain their missiles by -
> The Lightening that preceded it
> Struck no one but myself -
> But I would not exchange the Bolt
> For all the rest of Life -
> Indebtedness to Oxygen
> The Happy may repay.

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4 Bible, The Acts:22:6-11. "And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shown from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground... And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus.

5 Koran, Al-'Araf, 7:143. "And when Moses came to Our appointed tryst and his Lord had spoken unto him, he said: My Lord! Show me (Thy self) that I may gaze upon Thee. He said: Thou wilt not see Me, but gaze upon the mountain! If it stand still in its place, then thou wilt see Me. And when his Lord revealed (His) glory to the mountain He sent it crashing down, and Moses fell down senseless..." (Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, Mentor Religious Classic. New York.

But not the obligation
To Electricity -
It founds the Homes and decks the Days
And every clamor bright
Is but the gleam concomitant
Of that waylaying Light -
The Thought is quiet as a Flake -
A Crash without a Sound
How Life's reverbrations -
It's Explanation found - Vol.III, 1581

The poem begins metaphorically with the distant rumble of thunder long after the lightening had struck. The lightening represents the essence of supernal beauty and divine love and it has come to the poet with the suddenness of a flash of lightening. The thunder is the subjective reverbration of the individual self of the poet, which only she can hear, for the lightening struck no one but herself and although it was over in a moment, the effects of the experience are to continue for a long time, like the sound of thunder late in the afternoon when noon's shafts of light are laid down. In the order of nature, the bolt of lightening would be terrifying and destructive but it is not so in the spiritual context that the poet speaks of. The "Bolt" is so dear to her that she would not exchange it for anything else. The gift of physical existence, "Indebtedness to Oxygen", can be repaid by people with many acts of benevolence or kindliness but divine love or the obligations to divine love "Electricity", can never be fulfilled. It is this divine love,

the "waylaying light", which is concomitant with all the gleams of human existence. It founds homes, decorates the days of worldly life and is seen everywhere in all human activity. It is this divine gleam which gives meaning to beauty, love and death, indeed, to human life itself. In the concluding lines of the poem, the poet resumes the metaphor of the thunder which is a crash without a sound. But its reverbrations in life present the explanation of its meaning to the poet and this meaning is the essence of all knowledge which can be gained in this complex and crowded human existence.

II

Emily Dickinson often thought of Lord Christ as her divine lover and some of her bridal poems celebrate her marriage to the Saviour. In Christian tradition the nuns are known as the brides - of - the - Lamb and there was nothing new or original when she thought of herself as the bride of Christ. In one of her poems she referred to herself as a Nun.

> Madonna dim, to whom all Feet may Come,
> Regard a Nun. Vol.II, 918

Her habit of dressing in immaculately white bridal dress from the age of thirty till her death was, perhaps, motivated by the same desire. Although in her adoloscence she bewailed her loss of love for Christ in one of her letters to Abiah Root; "Christ is

calling... and I am standing alone in rebellion",[6] and although she refrained from professing her faith openly, yet it seems almost certain that her years of maturity were distinguished by her deep love for Christ. Without such a love she could not have written her poems about Christ and, most certainly, she would have never written the bridal poems. In Hindu tradition, the highest form of worship for a woman is to consider the Lord as her husband, "Pati". This attitude was made famous by the Indian saint-poet, Mira Bai, who always sang of Lord Krishna as her husband. Legend ascribes this attitude of Mira Bai to a biographical incident. It is said that Mira Bai, when only a child of ten, had gone to attend a marriage along with her father. After seeing the bridegroom, she innocently asked her father as to who her bridegroom was. The embarased father replied, after considerable hesitation, that her bridegroom was the Lord - Lord Krishna. From that day, the legend goes, she deemed herself to be the bride of the Lord and sang and danced with complete self-surrender and abandon. Even when she was married to the Rana of Udaipur, she refused to give up her devotion to Lord Krishna and refused to accept anybody else as her husband. After she was widowed, the Rana's brother who succeeded him, sent her a poisoned cup of drink but, it is said, the poison had no effect on her. She has celebrated this miraculous incident in one of her devotional songs.

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6 Letters, Vol.I, p. 94.

The Rana sent the poisoned cup
But the living Mira danced in ecstasy.[7]

Even in the absence of this legend, Mira Bai's devotion would have been perfectly understood, as it was in accordance with the Hindu tradition. In reading Emily Dickinson's bridal poems, the Indian reader is constantly reminded of Mira Bai. In some of the bridal poems, Emily Dickinson thought of the entire ceremony of marriage in purely temporal terms.

A Wife - at Daybreak I shall be -
Sunrise - Hast thou a Flag for me?
At Midnight, I am but a Maid,
How short it takes to make it Bride -
Then - Midnight, I have passed from thee
Unto the East, and Victory -

Midnight - Good Night! I hear them call,
The Angels bustle in the Hall -
Softly my Future climbs the Stair,
I fumble at my Childhood's prayer
So soon to be a child no more -
Eternity, I'm coming - Sir,
Savior - I've seen the face - before! Vol.I, 461

The expectation and excitement with which she speaks about her marriage are purely in earthly terms. She is still a maid at

7 Information about Mira Bai's life has been gathered from Lalitaprasad Shukla, Mirabai Ka Jivancharitra,(Calcutta, 1954). See also K.B. Jindal; A Histroy of Hindi Literature, (Allahabad, 1955), pp. 151-154, and Dr. Krishnadev Sharma; Mirabai-Padavali, (Hindi), (Delhi, 1974), pp. 11-18.

midnight but with the morning she hopes to be married and will thus be a wife. She innocently asks if the morning has a flag to greet her in her elevated position as a wife, as she also hopes that with her journey in time towards the morning (East), she would achieve victory. She bids goodnight to the night as she hears the bustle of angels in the hall and as her future bridegroom or husband climbs the stairs to take her to the marriage ceremony. She responds to eternity and says that the face of the Saviour, her bridegroom, is familier to her.

The midnight and the morning have more than literal connotations. The midnight refers to the period of her spiritual darkness of wordly existence and the morning represents her awakening from the midnight of temporal life and her transfer to the celestial life after death. Responding to the call when she says:

> Eternity, I'm coming - Sir,
> Savior - I've seen the face - before! Vol.I, 461

she is obviously referring to the eternal life after death when, married to the Saviour, she will be merged with eternity. In view of her deeper meaning, she does not speak of her future bridegroom or husband climbing the stairs but keeps the abstract noun with its suggestiveness.

> Softly my Future climbs the Stair. Vol. I, 461

The "Future" is thus both her future husband and future life after death which will bring about her union with the Saviour.

In a poem of similar theme she comments on her diffidence to become a bride.

> I am ashamed - I hide -
> What right have I - to be a Bride -
> So late a Dowerless Girl - Vol.I, 473

The marriage that she is thinking of is not an ordinary earthly marriage whose imagery she employs in the poem. In order to be the bride of Christ, she has to achieve the purity and perfection which she lacks. Spiritually, she is destitute and like the girl without dowry, "Dowerless", she cannot claim the right of being a bride. In the remaining part of the poem she wonders how she should adorn herself with trinkets or "Fabrics of Cashmere" to cover her imperfections and finally emerge confident, ready for marriage, hoping to be "Baptized - this Day - A Bride -". Emily Dickinson always thought of divine marriage as love's baptism or a second baptism. In one of her poems, she points out the similarity as well as the difference between baptism and love's baptism. In both, she is given a name with appropriate ceremony but she had no choice in the first baptism whereas in the second, the choice was entirely her own.

I'm ceded - I've stopped being Their's
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading - too -

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace -
Unto supremest name -
Called to my Full - The Crescent dropped -
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank - too small the first -
Crowned - Crowing - on my Father's breast -
A half unconscious Queen -
But this time - Adequate - Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown - Vol.II, 508

The opening phrase "I'm ceded" states the accomplishment of her marriage with Christ and with this new status, she also assumes a new name and stops belonging to her parents, "Their's". She had been given a name by her parents at the baptism ceremony at a country church but that name has become redundant now and her parents can put it away along with her dolls and other toys of her childhood. She has been baptized before but her second baptism or her marriage with Lord Christ, the "supremest name", is a deliberate choice. She has dropped her virginity ("crescent") but her celestial marriage has filled the empty arc of her

existence with one "Diadem", (Lord Christ). In her first baptism, though given a name ("crowned"), she was half conscious of her status and was brought to the ceremony crying ("crowing") on the breast of her father. But she came to the second baptism fully conscious and aware of the dignity to be conferred upon her ("Adequate - Erect"), with a free will to choose or reject. And she has deliberately chosen the crown of divine marriage.

Using conventional terminology borrowed from Roman Catholicism, she made the most explicit statement of her celestial marriage in another poem.

> Given in Marriage unto Thee
> Oh thou Celestial Host -
> Bride of the Father and the Son
> Bride of the Holy Ghost
>
> Other Betrothal shall dissolve
> Wedlock of Will decay -
> Only the keeper of this Ring
> Conquer Mortality. Vol.II, 817

It is such a marriage that is everlasting, whereas all earthly marriages, even of deliberate choice, must decay and dissolve with death. The celestial marriage conquers death and a person who has achieved such a marriage and is "the keeper of this Ring", will no longer be subject to spiritual mortality, even though physical death may come to her as to others.

III

The preceding discussion of some of the bridal poems shows Emily Dickinson's absolute dedication to Lord Christ and her surrender of the self to Him. She believed that divine love was the only source of all wisdom and it is through it that human life and its multifarious activities can become meaningful. It remains to be seen that she spoke of Jesus with the freedom and familiarity which her love for Him had bestowed upon her. Here, again, she reminds the Indian reader of the devotional songs of Mira Bai who always used the imagery of profane or earthly love in expressing divine love. In one of her poems, Emily Dickinson presents a dialogue between Jesus and herself in most familiar terms, used only by lovers.

"Unto Me?" I do not know you -
Where may be your House?

"I am Jesus - Late of Judea -
Now - of Paradise -"

Wagons - have you - to convey me?
This is far from Thence -

"Arms of Mine - sufficient Phaeton -
Trust Omnipotence."

I am spotted - "I am Pardon" -
I am small - "The Least

Is esteemed in Heaven the Chiefest -
Occupy my House" - Vol.II, 964

At the call of the Lord, "Come unto me", she brightly replies that she does not know Him. It is apparent that she is feigning ignorance. On being told who He is, she readily agrees to accompany Him but again coquettishly asks if He has conveyance to carry her, for the place where she is, the world, is far away from paradise from where Jesus has come. On being assured that His arms are enough to carry her, she again offers lame excuses: "I am spotted", and "I am small". The clever phrasing of the conversation makes the reader see through her pretences. Indeed, that is the beauty of the poem and its delightful progression. She is speaking of her spiritual experience, but the imagery is adriotly chosen from profane love.

Again, she returns to the same coquettish delay of her surrender to Jesus in another poem.

> Just so - Jesus - raps -
> He - doesn't weary -
> Last - at the Knocker -
> And first - at the Bell.
> Then - on divinest tiptoe - standing -
> Might He but spy the lady's soul -
> When He - retires -
> Chilled - or weary -
> It will be ample time for - me -
> Patient - upon the steps - until then -
> Heart! I am knocking - low at thee. Vol.I, 317

"The lady's soul" is the poet's own soul in hiding when Jesus knocks at her door, first at the bell, then at the knocker. He

stands on His "divinest" tiptoe waiting for her, creating a fear in her that He may spy her soul hiding because of the awareness of her imperfections. The poet hopes that when He retires to His chamber, it will be her turn to go to Him and wait for Him at His door, but, for that, there was ample time. Patient till such moment arrives, she has only to know at her own heart which is thrilled at the prospect of meeting Jesus.

She did not always speak of her love with the same self-assurance or cheerfulness. In one of her poems, she describes the agony of her soul, bordering on despair, at her inability to find Jesus. She had hopes of her acceptance by Him and unable to achieve it, the only course left to her is to pray and pray to Him. If the arms of Jesus can set at rest the earthquake or the "maelstrom", can it not soothe the turbulence of her soul? The interrogative implies the affirmative but it further adds to her agony.

> At least - to pray - is left - is left -
> Oh Jesus - in the Air -
> I know not which thy chamber is -
> I'm knocking - everywhere -
>
> Thou settest Earthquake in the South -
> And Maelstrom, in the Sea -
> Say, Jesus Christ of Nazareth -
> Hast thou no Arm for Me? Vol.II, 502

The imagery here, as elsewhere in her poems of divine love,

is taken from earthly love. The frantic beloved, not knowing the exact chamber of her Lord, is knocking everywhere. The situation is, in the mundane sense, that of a girl who has waited long enough for her lover to come to her. But finding her desire not materializing, she desperately comes out to find him out herself and knocks at various places for the purpose. Again, disappointed, she feels that prayer is the only course left to her.

It is evident from a discussion of these poems that divine love was as much Emily Dickinson's concern as earthly love and, in addition to the poems where these two allied but different emotions are recognizable, there are quite a few poems where the identity of the heavenly lover is blurred. These poems do not, however, conceal her faith in divine love as the culmination of the highest spiritual attainment. If she spoke of Christ as her lover, it was more from absolute devotion to Him rather than from a desire to display her wit. To speak in familiar terms about Jesus, is the prerogrative of souls that are committed to His love and care.

Chapter VIII

DEATH

Death, "that lonesome glory" (Vol.III, 1370), is one of the perennial themes of poetry. In the English language, there exists, what is often referred to, not without sarcasm, as the graveyard school of poetry,[1] where death forms the focal point of the observations on the illusory nature of human existence and its equally ephemeral vanities. Apart from this recurrent attitude, the essence of what has been written on death, is amply summarised by Keats' sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be". Fear of death is natural enough, for it bears testimony to the universal love of life; and death is the most formidable adversary of love. But a preoccupation with the fear of death is a morbidity which neither adds to human dignity nor lessens the eternal deprivations of death. Human history is replete with examples where death has been embraced with a smile and when the candle has been put out, for there was nothing to look at. In English and American poetry before Emily Dickinson and even after, in recent years, the concern of the poet has been with the emotions, not necessarily of fear, aroused by death as in the great elegies of the nineteenth

1 The title of this school of poetry has apparently been borrowed from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard" but it includes poets from seventeenth as well as from the eighteenth century.

century.[2] There has been no attempt to find the meaning of death or to define the mystery which has bewildered human understanding.

But Emily Dickinson's attitude is wholly different. It is the confrontation of a keenly perceptive and intensely sensitive mind with the mystery of death, a confrontation in which the poet's highly original angle of vision lends startling colours to what she perceives. "I suppose", she wrote in a letter, "there are depths in every Consciousness, from which we cannot rescue ourselves - to which none can go with us - which represent us Mortally - the Adventure of Death."[3] In her own inimitable way, she surveys the "trackless waste love has never trod"[4] and her poems present a persistent endeavour to discover what the human mind has failed to find out so far. She muses about death, watches with superb detachment the last onslaught on human life and its possible consequence and records her observations with the singular veracity given only to great artists. It would be wrong to say, however, that her response is totally free from the traditional attitude; there are echoes of the graveyard school of poetry and its commonplace bathos or philosophizing.[5] There are also occasions when she is assailed with the terror of

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2 Most notable amongst them, are P.B. Shelley's "Adonais", Lord Alfred Tennyson's "In Memorium. A.H.H." and Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis."

3 Letters, Vol.II, p. 612.

4 Ibid., Vol.III, p. 752.

5 See Anderson; Emily Dickinson's Poetry, pp. 231 and 239.

death whose "eclat" even the beggars would gladly "spurn". But these occasions are insignificant as compared to the more frequent situations where she strikes a new note in her poems on death. She analyses her experience with characteristic acuteness, for "Dying is a wild Night and a New Road."[6]

One of the obvious reasons for the obsessive concern she felt for death was her early acquaintance with it in life. For fifteen years, up to her twentyfifth year, she lived on Pleasant Street, from where she watched the funeral processions of Amherst passing by to the adjacent cemetery, the "forest of the Death" (Vol.II, 615), with its trees of white tombstones. The death of her friend Sofia Holland left her in a "fixed melancholy" when she was only thirteen and the graphic description she gave of the sad event two years later is the measure of the depth of her sorrow:[7]

> "Then it seemed to me I should die too if I could not be permitted to watch over her or even to look at her face. At length the doctor said she must die and allowed me to look at her a moment through the open door. I took off my shoes and stole softly, to the sick room. There she lay mild and beautiful as in health and her pale features lit up with an unearthly smile."

This was her first confrontation with, what she called in later years, a hideous, inequitable mistake. "Perhaps Death", she

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6 Letters, Vol.II, p. 462.

7 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 32.

wrote in one of her letters, "- gave me awe for friends - striking sharp and early, for I held them since - in a brittle love - of more alarm, than peace." In later years she saw the death of her father who was one of the shaping influence of her life and her mother who had remained invalid for many years prior to her death, watched and nursed by her. She suffered the death of dear relatives and friends, including J.G.Holland, Samuel Bowles and Rev. Charles Wadsworth but the most stunning grief came to her in the death of her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert, a grief from which she did not wholly recover in the remaining years of her life. Her poignant cry echoes in every bereaved heart.

> "'Open the Door, open the Door, they are waiting for me', was Gilbert's sweet command in delirium. Who were waiting for him, all we possess we would give to know - Anguish at last opened it, and he ran to the little grave at his Grandparents' feet - All this and more, though is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me its name!"[8]

The intensity of these utterances reveals her extreme sensitiveness to death and no wonder she set out to probe the inscrutable mystery.

II

One of the most powerful impressions that registered itself on her mind as those she loved dropped out of her beloved circle,

8 Letters, Vol.III, p. 803. For Thomas Gilbert Dickinson's death, see also Jay Leyda, Vol.II, pp. 506-510.

was the snapping of all human relationships between the living and the dead, between the visible world and the mighty bourn from which no traveller returns. Death is "the White Exploit" (Vol.II, 922), which annuls the power of communication, she said in one of her poems. Again, she repeats the idea in another poem:

> Today or this noon
> She dwelt so close
> I almost touched her
> Tonight she lies
> Past neighbourhood
> And bough and steeple
> Now past surmise. Vol.III, 1702

Those who have been dead for years and those who die today go equally out of our lives forever. Emily Dickinson wonders at the majestic "overtakelessness" of those who have accomplished death, for death interposes like a 'Hyphen' between man's mortal life and his desire for immortality. Similarly, the dead are cut off from the world of our joys and sorrows. The rainbow gleams in the sky after the storm, the clouds straggle down the horizon like wild elephants and the birds blissfully wake up in their sheltered nests but

> Alas, how heedless were the eyes -
> On whom the summer shone! Vol.I, 194

and again,

No colour in the Rainbow
Perceive, when you are gone Vol.II, 1026

These poems might appear sentimental effusions to a casual reader but we find in them a pointer to the universal craving for establishing communion with the dead. Perhaps, it was this craving of the human heart which gave birth to the belief in the immortality of soul or in the life after death. Man has accepted death with bowed head, in grief stricken silence and utter humility, painfully aware of the absolute helplessness of human life which is circumscribed and limited by death. But he has also hoped against hope that life would be renewed, if not in this world, in the next world to come, This belief has softened the pangs of separation from the dead. In Emily Dickinson's poems on death there is no such softening of the sorrow. What gives her a sweet assurance is the knowledge that the bustle of life in its multifarious phases would continue.

Tis sweet to know that stocks will stand
When we with Daisies lie -
That Commerce will continue -
And Trades as briskly fly -
It makes the parting tranquil
And keeps the soul serene - Vol.I, 54

A large number of her poems are musings about death, which at times degenerate into commonplace observations. But most of these poems are enlivened by the whimsy of her thought or utterance. In one of her poems, she thinks about the daisy which

vanished from the field and about the slippers which tiptoed to paradise. The brief span of life enjoyed by the flowers comes to an end imperceptibly, like the gradual withdrawal of tide. This observation is contained in the lines characteristic of her.

> Oozed so in crimson bubbles
> Day's departing tide -
> Blooming - tripping - flowing - Vol.I, 28

Again, she observes that death is a long sleep which has no stirrings of the morning; it is an idleness upon a bank of stone "To bask the Centuries away -/ Nor once look up - for Noon?" Death is like a hill which blocks the view of a child and demarcates the boundary between the known and the unknown world to which we go. Death is a dialogue between the soul, "the spirit", and the dust. Death commands the soul to dissolve but the soul ignores the command.

> Death doubts it - Argues from the Ground -
> The Spirit turns away
> Just laying off for evidence
> An Overcoat of Clay. Vol.II, 976

Death, like life, also bestows gifts which are "room", "escape from circumstances" and "a name", and the poet is not quite sure whose gifts are better - life's or death's. Life is a "skein of misery" which no power can stretch and the "tired lives" are

laid back in the mysterious drawers. In this baffling earth, there is no gratitude more overwhelming than the "grace of death." Dynasties, systems and citadels are dissolved and repaired; tracts of wastes are filled with blossoms by the spring but death is exempt from change. In the great silence created by death, it is a comfort to hear the sound of the "living clock" and "A short relief to have the wind / Walk boldly up and knock". Even a beggar would not accept the eclat of death if he had the power to spurn. Death carries us to be grasped by God but

> The Maker's cordial visage,
> However good to see,
> Is shunned, we must admit it,
> Like an adversity. Vol.III, 1718

III

In these musings about death, it is difficult, perhaps unnecessary, to expect any consistency in her ideas. Indeed, their beauty lies in their varied and unexpected turn of thought running into contraries. Similar in structure is the group of poems where she describes death as she observed it. This group falls into two further divisions of poems where death is described by the external appearance and signs and where she imagines death happening to her as an experience. Both these groups reveal her deep psychological insight and her uncommon power of observation. Throughout these descriptions, in spite of her deep sympathy, there is no involvement of the self and

the poet is, as always, out with a lantern looking for herself. She notices the "numb look" of the house where death has taken place. The neighbours rustle, the doctor drives away, a window is abruptly flung open and the children hurry by. The minister, the milliner and the undertaker, "the man of the Appalling Trade", all go into the house in preparation of "that Dark Parade". Again, she notices:

> The Bustle in a House
> The Morning after Death
> Is solemnest of industries
> Enacted upon Earth -
>
> The Sweeping up the Heart
> And putting Love away
> We shall not want to use again
> Until Eternity. Vol.II, 1078

In another poem she observes the pangs of pain visible in the features, a quickening of breath and an overpowering emotion at parting which denominates death. Again, she describes a death scene with characteristic brevity.

> I've seen a Dying Eye
> Run round and round a Room -
> In search of something - as it seemed -
> Then Cloudier become -
> And then - obscure with Fog -
> And then - be soldered down
> Without disclosing what it be
> 'Twere blessed to have seen - Vol.II, 547

The most successful poem of this group, however, is the one which presumably describes the death of Laura Dickey who died at her parents' home in Amherst in a house next to Dickinson homestead.[9] But it would be wrong to limit the poem to a particular event. In its most faithful observation of detail and in its great descriptive beauty, the poem transcends the particular and merges into the universal.

The last Night that she lived
It was a Common Night
Except the Dying - this to Us
Made Nature different

We noticed smallest things -
Things overlooked before
By this great light upon our Minds
Italicized - as 'twere.

As We went out and in
Between Her final Room
And Rooms where Those to be alive
Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist
While she must finish quite
A jealousy for Her arose
So nearly infinite -

We waited while she passed -
It was a narrow time -
Too jostled were Our Souls to speak
At length the notice came.

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9 See the footnote to poem number 1100 in Vol.II of her poems (Harvard Edition).

She mentioned, and forgot -
Then lightly as a Reed
Bent to the Water, struggled scarce -
Consented, and was dead -

And We - We placed the Hair -
And drew the Head erect -
And then an awful leisure was
Belief to regulate - Vol.II, 1100

It is one of those poems where the critic feels to be superfluous. The poem communicates beyond the point of elucidation and forms an immediate rapport with the reader. What one may say is that only Emily Dickinson could write about death as "this great light" italicized upon our minds and only she could employ the simile of the lightly bending reed to denote a death without struggle or only she could describe the lonesome vacuum created by death in the concluding stanza. In another poem, she describes a child with her usual consummate skill, communicating the startling realization that the child who "lay as if at play" was in fact dead.

Her merry Arms, half dropt -
As if for lull of sport -
An instant had forgot
The Trick to start -

Her dancing Eyes - ajar -
As if their Owner were
Still sparkling through
For fun - at you - Vol.I, 369

With similar respect for details and with equal detachment, she reproduces the situations where she imagines her own death. In one of her early poems she simply muses if anybody would really notice if she quietly slipped from her chair or slept too soundly.

> For Chanticleer to wake it -
> Or stirring house below -
> Or giddy bird in orchard -
> Or early task to do? Vol.I, 146

The poet wonders if it was not ironical that the little plump figure which had led such a crowded life with "Busy needles, and spools of thread - / And trudging feet from school -", should reach "so small a goal" of the grave. In another poem, she treats her death in the witty manner reminiscent of the metaphysical tradition in English poetry.

> Dying! Dying in the night!
> Wont somebody bring the light
> So I can see which way to go
> Into the everlasting snow?
>
> And "Jesus"! Where is Jesus gone?
> They said that Jesus - always came -
> Perhaps he doesn't know the House -
> This way, Jesus, Let him pass! Vol.I, 158

Again, she describes approaching death in another poem.

The Dusk kept dropping - dropping - still
Now Dew upon the Grass -
But only on my Forehead stopped -
And wandered in my Face -

* * * * *

How well I knew the Light before -
I could not see it now -
'Tis Dying - I am doing - but
I'm not afraid to know - Vol.II, 692

But the best realized poem of this group is "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -". It combines the description of death both from outside and inside. In the first three stanzas of the poem, it is the background which is emphasized. She notices the tense silence in the room resembling the lull before the storm. People gathered round the bedside, have dried their tears, and breathing hard, they watch for the moment when death, "the king", would appear. She assigns her keepsakes and it is then that "a Fly" interposes between her and the light.

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see - Vol.I, 465

There are at least two poems which belittle the struggle of death. In one of her poems she observes:

I die - takes just a little while -
They say it does'nt hurt -
It's only fainter - by degrees -
And then - It's out of sight - Vol.I, 255

In a similar poem, she comments almost ironically:

The Dying need but, little, Dear,
A Glass of Water's all,
A Flower's unobtrusive Face
To punctuate the Wall, Vol.II, 1026

But this does not mean that Emily Dickinson was not aware of the grim battle or the agony of death. In one of her poems "The Frost of Death was on the Pane -" she describes how they struggled against death like sailors fighting against a leak. The frost of death keeps on crawling till

We pried him back
Ourselves we wedged
Himself and her between
Yet easy as the narrow Snake
He forked his way along Vol.II, 1136

In another poem, "A Clock stopped -" where she presents life in the metaphor of a clock, she describes the throes of death.

An awe came on the Trinket
The Figures hunched, with pain -
Then quivered out of Decimals -
Into Degreeless Noon. Vol.I, 287

Again, she thinks of death as the unfrequented road through pain, which has many a turn and thorn. The agony of death, in accompaniment with other innumerable deprivations, makes death a source of terror. This explains why the image of death presented in the traditional drawings consists of the lurid skeleton emerging out of enveloping darkness, prowling about noiselessly and advancing unfailingly towards its victim. Emily Dickinson has also presented death as a sinister ghost, a ghost dressed in "Mechlin", with no sandal on his feet and with movement "like flakes of snow". The surest horror is evoked by the description of his noiseless laughter which sounds like a horrid chuckle.

His conversation - seldom -
His laughter, like the Breeze
That dies away in Dimples
Among the pensive Trees - Vol.I, 274

After a brief encounter with this ghost, the poet concludes:

> And God forbid I look behind -
> Since that appalling Day! Vol.I, 274

There are occasions too when Emily Dickinson revolts against a death which seems to be the game of an insensate Deity playing with the helpless victims for whom there is no escape. In one of her poems she talks of death as murder by degrees and then couched in a metaphysical conceit she expresses the idea bordering almost on blasphemy.

> The cat reprieves the Mouse
> She eases from her teeth
> Just long enough for Hope to teeze -
> Then mashes it to death - Vol.II, 762

Similarly, the quiet sarcasm of her poem, "How soft this Prison is", emphasizes the incongruity of death in a world which the all-pervading benevolence of God is said to have created.

> How soft this Prison is
> How sweet these sullen bars
> No Despot but the King of Down
> Invented this repose
>
> Of Fate if this is All
> Has he no added Realm
> A Dungeon but a Kinsman is
> Incarceration - Home Vol.III, 1334

In a mood similar to the mood in the poems above, she questions the propriety of death and wonders about the land of the dead where everything is strange and incongruous.

> What Inn is this
> Where for the night
> Peculiar Traveller comes?
> Who is the Landlord?
> Where the maids?
> Behold, what curious rooms!
> No ruddy fires on the hearth -
> No brimming Tankards flow -
> Necromancer! Landlord!
> Who are these below? Vol.I, 115

IV

The most fascinating aspect of her poems on death is the presentation of death as a character.[10] From the earliest poems one notices the personification of death, sometimes as a fairy or a ghost, till he develops into a solid oriental potentate with the traditional splendour of his bearing, court and state gathering. Again, he appears as the cultured, gentle and persuasive suitor who escorts his love on a joy-ride. In these varying pictures of death as a character, it is as "the supple suitor" that death attracts the attention of the reader. That Emily Dickinson could imagine him as a lover is a testimony to the fact that she was able to conquer the fear of death. Once this happens, the funeral procession transforms itself into a

10 See Johnson, Emily Dickinson, pp. 222-224, and also Charles Anderson, pp. 242-243.

bridal procession in which the nebulous bridegroom gently leads his willing bride towards Eternity. The idea is most certainly a novel one in English and American poetry but to an Indian reader, this recalls to mind the devotional songs of Kabir, one of the most distinguished saint-poets of India, who always imagined the last journey towards the grave as the going away of the bride to her husband's house.[11] The bride faces the agonized parting from her parents and the companions of her life at her parent's home and at the same time she is thrilled at the prospect of meeting her love. The end of a life marks the beginning of a new one. Kabir noticed the inner resemblance between the funeral and bridal processions and he sang in amorous tunes and images about the pain and joy of the final parting. Emily Dickinson employs identical images and for her too the two journeys, however different they may seem to us, are inseparably merged into one.

Thus we find death as a fairy who "wears a spring upon its breast -/ And will not tell its name." The poet believes that it would be rude to weep in the fairy's presence as the sob "Might scare the quiet fairy / Back to her native wood." Again, we see death as "the postponeless creature" striding confidently and going about his business without wasting time. "Bold were it Enemy -/ Brief - were it friend -". Then he emerges as a

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11 Almost all the devotional songs ("Bhajans") of Kabir use, directly or indirectly, the imagery of marriage for death and the bridal and funeral processions are thus merged.

character, a person about whom nothing was known in his "native town". Nobody knew his father. He was never a boy and had no playmates. He came to be known only in his manhood.

> Industrious! Laconic!
> Punctual! Sedate!
> Bold as a Brigand!
> Stiller than a Fleet! Vol.I, 153

This industrious person is transformed into a personage of great dignity with purple and crown. Such a person was too stately and grand to be an Earl or a Marquis. His splendour testified to his being possibly a "Czar Petite" or a Pope. The recognition comes that the royal figure is the King. "I met a King this afternoon" or again the poet describes the last onset - "when the king/ Be witnessed - in the Room".

But it is when death assumes the role of the cavalier suitor that he distinguishes himself. In many of her poems, Emily Dickinson presents him as a refined gentleman who woos by offering many gifts and even his bold impetuosity remains pleasant. This suitor finally wins and carries his love in triumph.

> Death is the supple Suitor
> That wins at last -
> It is a stealthy Wooing
> Conducted first
> By pallid innuendoes
> And dim approach

But brave at last with Bugles
And a bisected Coach
It bears away in triumph
To Troth unknown. Vol.III, 1445

This experience of death as a suitor is best realized in a poem which has been praised by many lovers of Emily Dickinson's poetry.[12] "Because I could not stop for Death" is remarkable for the restraint which gives poignancy to the last ride of this mortal life. Death has been very polite to her in coming to stop at her doors to take her out and in response to his "civility", she puts aside her work and leisure to be with him. As they drive away slowly, they pass the children playing at school and the ripe harvest in the fields till finally they pass the time and space as we know in this world. She shivers in her light gown and scarf as the evening deepens and the cold dew begins to drop imperceptibly over the scene. They come to the "House", the final abode of the grave whose roof was scarcely visible and whose cornice was in the ground. Since her arrival at the new house, she lost count of time and even if centuries might have passed, it seemed shorter than that day when she first surmised that the horses of her carriage were leading her towards Eternity.

12 The late Professor Allen Tate was the first critic who rated this poem very highly in 1932 in an essay included in Interpretations of American Literature. It was first published in Allen Tate; Collected Essays, (December, 1932).

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me -
The Carriage held but just Ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove - He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labour and my leisure too,
For His Civility -

We passed the school, where children strove
At Recess - in the Ring -
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain -
We passed the Setting Sun -

Or rather - He passed Us -
The Dews drew quivering and chill -
For only Gossamer, my Gown -
My Tippet - only Tulle -

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground -
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -

Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity - Vol.II, 712

It is in this poem that the fusion of the two journeys, about which I have spoken earlier, takes place - the fusion which Kabir loved to present in his poems.

In conclusion one may ask why Emily Dickinson made death one of her "flood subjects". "Match me the silver Reticene -/ Match me the Solid Calm" -, she wrote in one of her poems. What then has she gained in probing the "solid calm"? Was it morbidity or only curiosity? In asking these questions one is reminded of Prince Gautama who enquired about death from his charioteer Channa and on being told that death was the inescapable fate of all mortals, renounced the world to find out the truth for himself.[13] Emily Dickinson was also a seeker after truth and in probing the mystery of death she has at least defined the limits of human knowledge. Keats wrote

> How strange it is that man on earth should roam,
> And lead a life of woe, but not forsake
> His rugged path; nor dare he view alone
> His future doom which is but to awake.[14]

At least it can be said about Emily Dickinson that she viewed her doom and the doom of all mankind without fear. In examining the various aspects of death, she created her poems and she might have said what Kabir sang:

> "Kabir says '0 fellow sadhu', deep is the mystry.
> Let wise men seek to know where rests the bird."[15]

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13 Great Men of India, Ed. L.F. Rushbrooks Williams, (The Home Library Club, 1938). See the essay on Gautama Buddha, p.421.

14 The Poetical Works of John Keats, Ed. H.W. Garrod, (Oxford, 1939). See the second stanza of "On Death", p. 537.

15 Great Men of India, see the essay on Kabir, p. 523.

Chapter IX

IMMORTALITY

Immortality is one of the cardinal faiths in Christianity, as in other great religions of the world, and belief in immortality, presupposes an unquestioning belief in God as well as in the existence of human soul. Like nature, love and death, immortality was one of the major subjects of Emily Dickinson's poetry. "You mention immortality", she remarked in one of her letters to Higginson, "That is the Flood subject."[1] Indeed, it was, not only a subject to which she returned again and again in her poems and letters but also a source of her searching analysis of a mystery about which no one could say anything with assured certitude. After the death of Wadsworth in 1882, she had written to one of the distinguished clergymen of her times, Washington Gladden, to inquire: "Is immortality true?"[2] The only answer she received was that "a thousand lines of evidence converge toward it; and I believe it. It is all I can say."[3] She had expressed her belief:

1 Letters, Vol. II, p. 454.

2 Jay Leyda, Vol.II, pp. 370-371.

3 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, quoted on p. 237. For the full text of the letter from Gladden, see Letters, Vol. III, p.731.

Eternity's disclosure
To favorites - a few -
Of the Colossal substance
Of Immortality Vol.I, 306

and, perhaps, she thought that Gladden was one of the favourites to whom this"colossal substance" had been revealed. I think she must have been quite disappointed to receive his answer. The lines quoted above are also a pointer to the fact that she did not consider herself to be one of the chosen favourites to whom the fullest disclosure of the mystery was made. Endowed with a mind which despised sacrosanct piety or belief, she endeavoured all her life to redefine some of even the most commonplace things in life, for which standard and largely accepted definitions already existed. It has often been remarked that her poetry is a poetry of definitions, or rather redefinitions, and one of the most recurrent modes of her operation as a poet, is to pick up an abstract noun and grapple with it till it yields some enunciation which she cannot wholly reject.[4] To such a mind, immortality was indeed a"colossal substance" which she could not hope to grasp without persistent efforts of her alert mind.

It was, again, natural that her mind be assailed with harrowing doubts, for there can be no stable faith without doubt in the initial stages. She was not one of those creatures who

4 The Great Experiment in American Literature, Ed. Carl Bode, pp. 64-66.

despise in private what they profess in public. Her faith as well as her doubt was expressed with equal emphasis and competence, and in matters of religious belief, she remained till the closing moments of her life a dauntless spirit with nothing to hide from others or even from herself. Some of the letters of her adolescent years, recount her fearless independence and honesty in not pretending to believe in what she actually did not believe. Her belief in immortality was also not free from doubts and she has freely expressed them in several of her poems. An eternal life for the soul, in the kingdom of heaven, presupposes a belief in heaven itself but Emily Dickinson was not sure of what eternal life would be like. She based her argument, in one of her poems, on the fact that she was finite and circumscribed by time; she could not comprehend the perfection and the glory of the eternal life to come.

Their Height in Heaven comforts not -
Their Glory - nought to me -
'Twas best imperfect - as it was -
I'm finite - I can't see -

The House of Supposition
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps -
To Me - shows insecure -

The Wealth I had - contented me -
If 'twas a meaner size -
Then I had counted it until
It pleased my narrow Eyes -

Better than larger values -
That show however true -
This timid life of Evidence
Keeps pleading - "I don't know" Vol.II, 696

Heaven, thus, is a house of supposition which exists in the mind of the devout. It is not a place of concrete reality which could stand apart from the human mind. Its dubious existence is like "acres of Perhaps" which is embellished by the glimmering frontiers created by the yearning of the human mind. The "acres of Perhaps" are, however, in the centre and, if belief and disbelief are seen mataphorically as light and darkness, the enclosed area of the arc is darkness with a thin lace of light on its peripheral fringe, in a way, highlighting the darkness in the centre. As it is, the wordly life, with whatever wealth it possesses, is more satisfying by its limited certitude. Any thing larger or better than itself is something which this "timid life of Evidence" does not know and keeps on pleading its ignorance.

Apart from the idea expressed, this poem is remarkable for its mode of expression. It is difficult to imagine any other nineteenth century poet in England or America defining heaven as the "house of supposition" and her use of the phrase "the acres of Perhaps", transforming an adverb into noun, anticipates similar verbal feats of E.E. Cummings and the imagist poets of the twentieth century.[5] Similarly, life in

5 See Chapter X for examples.

this world and its possible beliefs and its varied activities are governed by the rational mind which, in its turn, depends on evidence or cause and effect. And yet rationalism does not solve all the mysteries with which human life is confronted; faced with some of the crucial problems of the spirit, it is left in complete bewilderment. The limitation of the rational mind, with all the ramifications, is expressed by Emily Dickinson in a single line: "This timid life of Evidence" - timid because it fails to project itself into the cosmos to explore the larger truths which transcend the need of evidence.

In another poem she asks rhetorically as to what place was better, this 'Heaven' of worldly existence or the heaven to come which has an appendix of doubt. The answer is implied in the qualifying phrase, "Codicil of Doubt", which she uses for heaven. Whatever drawbacks there may be in this world, at least it exists solidly and is free from the doubt of its existence. This is not so in the case of heaven. The choice, therefore, is very obvious but the poet makes it further clear by employing the saying that a bird in hand is better than two in the bush.

Which is best? Heaven -
Or only Heaven to come
With that old Codicil of Doubt?
I cannot help esteem

The "Bird within the Hand"
Superior to the one
The "Bush" may yield me
or may not
Too late to choose again. Vol.II, 1012

If the bush does not yield the two promised birds, she says ironically, there will be no further opportunity to exercise the choice again.

In a more devastatingly frank poem, she comments that our belief in heaven is only a pretension and, at best, is only a kind of self deception which we practise on ourselves by believing in what we actually do not believe. Such a belief can neither give any assurance nor can it elevate our spirit. If heaven exists, as it is commonly believed to be, it is an estate which thrives on the deprivation of this world of ours, that is, by depriving people of this world of what they have, including their souls.

> That it will never come again
> Is what makes life so sweet
> Believing what we don't believe
> Does not exhilarate.
>
> That if it be, it be at best
> An ablative estate -
> This instigates an appetite
> Precisely opposite Vol.III, 1741

And if heaven is a symbol of deprivation, the worldly life becomes more alluring, and not alone for the reason that life comes only once and does not return again. She repeats the idea of deprivation in another poem and makes the pointed comment that except for the marauding hand of heaven, this world was

pleasant enough to be a heaven.

> Of Heaven above the firmest proof
> We fundamental know
> Except for it's marauding Hand
> It had been Heaven below. Vol.III, 1205

Again, she refers to death as the bisecting messenger of Paradise or heaven, implying that such a messenger can only diminish man.

> Of Paradise existence
> All we know
> Is an uncertain certainty -
> But it's vicinity infer,
> By it's Bisecting
> Messenger - Vol.III, 1411

The vicinity of heaven can thus be only inferred and what remains with us is "uncertain certainity" of its existence. Since there is no affidavit, she said elsewhere, of heaven, meaning that no one can make a statement about the existence of heaven on oath, "it would affront us / To dwell in such a place -". Emily Dickinson expressed her preference for the mortal life in one of her early poems when she said: "Going to Heaven! / How dim it sounds!", and then expressed her own view in unmistakable terms

> I'm glad I dont believe it
> For it w'd stop my breath -

And I'd like to look a little more
At such a curious Earth!
I am glad they did believe it
Whom I have never found
Since the mighty Autumn afternoon
I left them in the ground. Vol.I, 79

The irony of the concluding four lines establishes the superiority of her choice to stay in and look at the earth a while longer.

II

In all these poems of doubt, Emily Dickinson displays a strategy of paradox and employs a language which is predominantly paradoxical. Her choicest phrases reveal this characteristic: phrases such as house of supposition, acres of perhaps, heaven with codicil of doubt, ablative estate, uncertain certainty and affidavit of heaven, gain their strength of wit by the paradox they embody. But that very wit takes away the serious intent of her statements. Doubts do not negate a belief; they only show the searching alertness of the mind. Emily Dickinson was a non-conformist of a new kind and her non-conformity consisted mainly in her rejection of the unthinking belief of the devout. She was a rebel against the orthodoxy of the valley in which she was born and brought up and yet the essence of puritanism lay at the root of all her thinking. This paradox in her own life is reflected in her attitude to heaven, soul, immortality and God. She expressed her occasional skepticism to mark her difference from the sacrosanct piety of the devout

ladies of Amherst whom she knew in life and disapproved. Her skepticism never completely demolished the firm and sound edifice of her belief. At least she knew that it was sturdy enough to withstand the buffets of the inquisitive forages of her mind. In refusing to follow the orthodox, she was in line with the new religious thinking of her day, which must have made inroads in the secluded village of Amherst.[6] But the new thinking seems more or less to confirm her revolt rather than initiate it. About an influential liberal preacher, Theodore Parker, she remarked in 1859:[7] "I never read before what Mr. Parker wrote. I heard that he was "poison". Then I like poison very well." This taste for the poison of liberalism prepared her to strike out on her own road of spiritual life. She was not alone on this road but she did not know that she was in good company of Carlyle and Thoreau and other new lights of religious thinking.[8]

Without a clear understanding of her own position in contemporary religious thinking, it is possible for the reader to go astray by her poems of doubt, expressing sometimes a derisive disbelief in matters most sacred to the human mind. Who can read, for instance, the following poem, with an accusation which we would not like to make even against a human friend, and remain without serious misgivings?

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6 See Charles Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry, p. 261.

7 Letters, Vol. II, p. 358.

8 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 233.

"Heavenly Father" - take to thee
The supreme iniquity
Fashioned by thy candid Hand
In a moment contraband -
Though to thrust us - seems to us
More respectable - "We are Dust" -
We apologize to thee
For thine own Duplicity - Vol.III, 1461

The devout would say that it is better not to believe in God than attribute duplicity to Him. But we know that her love for God gave her the liberty to speak to Him in the most familiar terms, just as she spoke about Christ with a certain amount of freedom which may seen presumptuous. In another poem she comments on the loss of faith both in Heaven and God.

Those - dying then,
Knew where thy went -
They went to God's Right Hand -
That Hand is amputated now
And God cannot be found -

The abdication of Belief
Makes the Behavior small -
Better an ignis fatuus
Than no illume at all - Vol.III, 1551

The poem is an explicit statement of the damage done to religious faith by the current social and scientific thought. There was a time, according to the poet, when the devout were confident of being received after death by God in a manner similar to

Lord Christ, who after His resurrection, was received in heaven and "sat on the right hand of God". That hand, symbolizing faith, has been amputed and belief in God has been shattered by new discoveries in scientific thought. Man has abdicated from belief and whatever he may do now, has lost its significance. The poet comments in the conclusion that a false or delusive light (ignis fatuus) is better than no light at all.

This poem, however, is not a statement of Emily Dickinson's own belief. It expresses the contemporary predicament of tension between faith and doubt. As it has already been pointed out, Emily Dickinson rejected the dogmas of the Puritan orthodoxy and at the same time refused to share the position held by the materialists. Her wavering between faith and doubt remained with her till the end but, considered as a whole, the affirmation of faith in her poetry is overwhelming as compared to its occasional negation or expression of skepticism. It is possible to establish that her faith in God and heaven remained unsullied in spite of her periodic moods of disbelief. At any rate, her skepticism is not strong enough to make a mockery of her belief in immortality. Even her faith in immortality did not run an even and smooth course and in moments of intense emotional stress and tragedy, she expressed her doubt about immortality itself. In the preceding discussion of her poems on heaven and God, her doubts in immortality are also latently visible, for faith in immortality is interdependent on faith in heaven and God.

There were also specific occasions when she directly expressed her doubt in immortality, or rather, her faith in immortality did not prove to be a strong support when she was confronted with tragedy in her personal life. After the death of her father who was one of the shaping forces in her life, her agonized comment on immortality revealed the fragile nature of her belief. "I am glad there is Immortality -", she said, "but would have tested in myself - before entrusting him."[9] She wrote after the death of her mother: "We don't know where she is, though so many tell us."[10] After the death of Charles Wadsworth, she wrote to one of his friends: "Are you certain there is another life? When overwhelmed to know, I fear that few are sure."[11] Again, the premature death of Samuel Bowles, elicited from her a comment surcharged with sorrow: "That those have Immortality with whom we talked about it, makes it no more mighty - but perhaps more sudden".[12] This comment is followed by the lines: "How brittle are the Piers / On which our Faith doth tread -". Indeed, it was a brittle ground and she had to watch her steps before it gave way completely. And she did watch her steps and never landed in the abysmal depths of didbelief.

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9 Letters, Vol. II, p. 528.
10 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 750.
11 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 779.
12 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 611.

III

Human nature has always revolted against the idea of complete annihilation of the body and soul and there has always been an almost desperate desire of the human heart to ward off the deprivations caused by death. Belief in immortality is, perhaps, a direct outcome of that desire, even if it may not be the fulfilment of it. It would make a very interesting reading if the expositions of the idea of immortality by the various religions of the world were compiled into one volume. In the ancient tradition both pagan and others, there seems to be a general agreement that human soul is indestructible and it keeps to shuttle back and forth from heaven in a constant flux of transmigration. Lord Buddha gave further complication to an already complex problem by the expression of the view that immortality or nirvana is an escape from the cycle of birth and death and that it is a cessation of the consciousness.[13] In Christianity, and other religions which came after it, immortality is inseperably linked with the resurrection of the dead on the Day of Judgement, and after the final reckoning, the soul will have an eternal existence. The resurrection of Christ has an added significance in Christianity, for it serves as proof of a similar process to be repeated in the cases of all the dead. Emily Dickinson's belief in immortality was primarily Christian and even when she felt that its mystery had not been disclosed to her, she believed that soul was immortal.

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13 The allusion is to Platonic philosophy, Vedantic philosophy and Mahayana Budhism.

We have already recounted and commented upon the moments of her doubt; we have also to note the affirmations of her faith. In one of her jottings, she wrote in a lyrical strain, surpassing the cadenced rythm of poetry;[14]

> "I hear robins a great way off, and wagons a great way off, and rivers a great way off, and all appear to be hurrying somewhere undisclosed to me."

The destination of all that exist in mortal life is undisclosed to her but it is not beyond surmise. She does not even make it explicit and that is the beauty of its suggestiveness. In a similar passage, written after the stunning bereavement caused by the death of his beloved nephew, Gilbert, she commented on immortality.[15]

> "The vision of Immortal life has been fulfilled - How simply at the last the Fathom comes! The Passanger and not the Sea, we find surprises us - ... show us, prattling Preceptor, but the way to thee! ...
>
> I see him in the Stars, and meet his sweet velocity in everything that flies - His life was like the Bugle, which winds itself away, his Elegy an echo - his Requiem ecstacy - Dawn and Meridian in one."

Not all her poems on immortality have the same intensity of utterance; quite a few of them are predestrian attempts to define it in rational and imaginative terms. The hazards of

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14 Letters, Vol.II, p. 504.
15 Ibid., Vol.III, p. 799.

this method are obvious, for immortality, like many other matters in religion, can be explained and understood through faith, not reason. In all the religions of the world, faith in some of the cardinal postulates is blind, or it is induced by revelation or the holy word. Human mind is too limited to encompass the cosmos and there are problems which lie beyond its circumference. Belief in God, for instance, cannot be completely rationalized, nor can the human mind claim to comprehend Him with the same assured competence as it can some of the mundane problems of wordly existence. Disbelief has always its roots in the attitude that what cannot be rationalized, does not exist. Emily Dickinson's doubts always seem to emerge from a similar attitude, although her purely rational attitude does not persist at all times. Indeed, there are occasions when she is diverted from belief by emotional stress. But she liked to rationalize and one of the methods she employed for the purpose was to define or redefine something in which she wished to believe. Her effort to define immortality is of the same category. Rev.Washington Gladden had written to her that a thousand lines of evidence converge toward immortality and she opted to examine the evidence before she could commit herself to the belief in immortality.

> When I count the seeds
> That are sown beneath,
> To bloom so, bye and bye -

When I con the people
Lain so low,
To be received as high

When I believe the garden
Mortal shall not see -
Pick by faith it's blossom
And avoid it's Bee
I can spare this summer, unreluctantly. Vol.I, 40

The growth of the seed into a plant, is a ressurection of the plant after death, similar to the promised rising of the dead, who are burried low in the grave, to be received in heaven. But heaven is a garden which the mortal eye has not seen. The poet does not want to be like those who metaphorically speaking, pick the flower (immortality) by the help of faith and avoid the painful sting of the bee (the rational mind). She is forced to postpone the plucking of the blossom till she is ready to endure the sting of the bee. The poem is not good poetry; it spells the word 'by' wrongly and has unnecessary apostrophe on 'its'. But one cannot fail to notice the striking metaphor of the concluding lines which state her attitude that she does not want to see immortality through faith but through reason, in spite of the hazards of the stings of the bee.

It does not necessarily follow that she did not know the limitations of the human mind.

The Life we have is very great
The Life that we shall see
Surpasses it, we know, because
It is Infinity.
But when all Space has been beheld
And all Dominion shown
The smallest Human Heart's extent
Reduces it to none. Vol.II, 1162

What she says in effect is that doubt in immortality is not due to lack of evidence. Even when complete evidence is produced and entire dimension of immortality has been exhibited to the eye, the human heart recoils from its immensity, for the heart is too small and limited to grasp its full significance. She, therefore, employs the homely metaphor of a two-storey building in which the first floor is mortality and the ground floor is immortality. Anything which sinks from the first floor, comes to the ground floor.

If my Bark sink
'Tis to another sea -
Mortality's Ground Floor
Is Immortality. Vol.III, 1234

brief poem of four lines employs two equally valid metaphors, the sea and the house. The bark or the boat is the symbol for soul and its sinking signifies death. But the sinking leads to its existence in another sea - the sea of immortality.

In a poem, more complicated in its thought and image,

Emily Dickinson expresses her faith in immortality. The crocus, a plant with yellow, white or purple flowers, recedes with the approach of winter but goes "home" gaily, unmindful of its deprivation. The source of its happiness is the belief that it will rise again and its lips keep up the praise of God till slowly and gradually it reappears one by one like the bargemen who walk back to the shore singing.

The feet of people walking home
With gayer sandals go -
The Crocus - till she rises
The Vassal of the snow -
The lips at Hallelujah
Long years of practice bore
Till bye and bye these Bargemen
Walked singing on the shore.

Pearls are the Diver's farthing
Extorted from the Sea -
Pinions - the Seraph's wagon
Pedestrian once - as we -
Night is the morning's Canvas
Larceny - legacy -
Death, but our rapt attention
To Immortality.

My figures fail to tell me
How far the Village lies -
Whose peasants are the Angels -
Whose Cantons dot the skies -
My Classics vail their faces -
My faith that Dark adores -
Which from its solemn abbeys
Such resurrection pours.

Vol.I, 7

The crocus is the dependent tenant of the snow, meaning, that it appears and disappears and appears again according to the wish of the feudal lord, the snow. And what is true of the crocus, is equally valid for human life. Just as the diver is rewarded by the pearl after he takes the plunge into the depth of the ocean, and the seraph has been raised to the first rank, immortality cannot be achieved without death. Night and morning stand for death and immortality; they are further compared to larceny and legacy. Night (death) is the sail which helps the morning (Immortality) to appear. If the canvas is taken to mean the canvas of the painter, then the line would mean that death serves as the canvas on which immortality is painted. Thus death is the gateway to the eternal life. If the deprivation of death resembles theft (larceny), the promise of immortality is the inheritance which has come down to man from God. Our attention, therefore, should be focussed on immortality, and not death, for death is the passage of the soul to eternal existence. Heaven is metaphorically presented as a village which the poet does not know nor does she know whose peasants the angels are and what districts (cantons) are charted on the sky by the dots of the stars. The highest principles of art and science (classics) only helped to veil the faces of heaven and its inhabitants. Still she adores the unknown place (Dark), for it is from the abbeys of this village that resurrection pours forth the dead to be received in heaven.

Thus the poem expresses the belief central to the poet's thought that although death may appear disconcerting by the loss it causes, yet it is the necessary stage before immortality. Again, we may not be able to comprehend immortality fully but that does not disprove its existence. Night is followed by day and, therefore, darkness is the harbringer of light and a necessary evil. In another poem, Emily Dickinson presents the mortal life metaphorically as water and eternal life as great water. Our thirst and need for water (life) is fully satisfied by the great water (immortality).

> We thirst at first - 'tis Nature's Act -
> And later - when we die -
> A little Water supplicate
> Of fingers going by -
>
> It intimates the finest want -
> Whose adequate supply
> Is that Great Water in the West
> Termed immortality - Vol.II, 726

The thirst for life is an act of nature and at the time of death as we see life slipping away from our fingers, we pray humbly for a little life more. But our thirst for life can only be quenched by immortality, for in that eternal state of the soul, life is endless.

In another poem, remarkable for its indirect argument and consequent ambiguity, Emily Dickinson propounds the truth that a

particular reality is known by its opposite.

> None can experience stint
> Who Bounty - have not known -
> The fact of Famine - could not be
> Except for Fact of Corn -
>
> Want is a meagre Art
> Acquired by Reverse -
> The Poverty that was not Wealth -
> Cannot be indigence. Vol. II 771

There can be no limitation without bounty, the poet argues, and no famine without corn. Similarly want acquires significance by opulence and the real poverty (indigence) is one which has known wealth. The real point of the poem, I think, is its juxtaposition of the metaphors for death and immortality. "Stint", "famine", "want", and "poverty" signify death and immortality is represented by "bounty", "corn", "opulence" (opposite of want) and "wealth". Without death there can be no immortality and the fact that death exists, is a proof of the existence of immortality. As every reality is matched by its opposite, the famine and loss caused by death are matched by the bounty and opulence of immortality.

Again, she gives a fuller treatment to this subject in another poem. Having travelled on the road of being to the point where it diverged into the "odd Fork" leading to eternity, the traveller is overawed to find before him the

cities of heaven but in between interposed the graveyard, "The Forest of the Dead". The road leading to eternity had to pass through the graveyard. Any reversal of the journey on the road of being was not possible as it was a journey into time and the route behind was sealed. The traveller could see the flag of eternity flying in front of him and God was there at every gate of the cities of heaven.

> Our journey had advanced -
> Our feet were almost come
> To that odd Fork in Being's Road -
> Eternity - by Term -
>
> Our pace took sudden awe -
> Our feet - reluctant - led -
> Before - were Cities - but Between -
> The Forest of the Dead -
>
> Retreat - was out of Hope -
> Behind - a Sealed Route -
> Eternity's White Flag - Before -
> And God - at every Gate - Vol.II, 615

This poem is an affirmation of her belief in immortality, heaven and God. In a shorter poem, immortality is proved by a different argument.

> That Such have died enable Us
> The tranquiller to die -
> That Such have lived,
> Certificate for Immortality. Vol.II, 1030

IV

Death of those around us convinces of its universality and no human being is exempt from it since it is one of the conditions of life. This inferred truth makes death easy for us and we can face it with a certain amount of serenity which, otherwise, would have been impossible. According to the same argument, since we know that many have lived after death, notable among them Jesus Christ, our knowledge should be a conclusive proof (certificate) of immortality. Again, she returns to the same idea in another poem with an altogether different approach, and this is one of several poems where immortality has been presented as a person.

> He lived the Life of Ambush
> And went the way of Dusk
> And now against his subtle name
> There stands an Asterisk
> As confident of him as we -
> Impregnable we are -
> The whole of Immortality intrenched
> Within a star - Vol.III, 1525

Immortality has been presented here as a soldier lying in ambush for mortal life. As it is concealed from the human eye and moves away in darkness, its subtle name is indicated by a star (asterisk). And yet there can be no doubt of its existence and our belief in it is firm (impregnable) and its significance is concentrated in the star (asterisk) which stands at the place where its name should have been. This

interpretation makes it clear that immortality carries people to heaven after death and that it is not known to the human mind. In this respect it closely resembles the soldier lying in ambush. The image of the soldier and the novel use of the word asterisk is the familiar witticism of the poet.

Immortality is again presented as a person, this time as "a shapeless friend".

> Conscious am I in my Chamber,
> Of a shapeless friend
> He doth not attest by Posture -
> Nor Confirm - by Word - Vol.II, 679

She develops this idea further that since immortality is invisible, she does not have to offer it a place or show courtesy but neither the lack of hospitality on her part nor silence on the part of immortality, forfeits probity of their relationship. She has no concrete proof as to who such a friend is.

> But instinct esteem Him
> Immortality. Vol.II, 679

Cast in a light-hearted mood, the poem repeats the basic postulates of Emily Dickinson's belief. This world is not the final end of human life, for there is a life beyond it. Wordly existence, therefore, co-exists with immortality. The close of life in this world opens a new life beyond. If it is so,

mortal life and immortality live side by side in the same chamber. But in spite of its proximity to life, immortality cannot be proved conclusively by "philosophy".

> This World is not Conclusion.
> A Species stands beyond -
> Invisible, as Music -
> But positive, as Sound -
> It beckons, and it baffles - Vol.II, 501

This is one of the chief characteristics of immortality that it is positive as sound and induces belief but the mind that seeks to comprehend it clearly, is baffled in its attempts to do so.

Again, immortality is seen as a friend in another poem. Any doubt in its existence is a blunder of our surmise, otherwise its presence can be felt in everyday life.

> The Blunder is in estimate
> Eternity is there
> We say as of a Station
> Meanwhile he is so near
> He joins me in my Ramble
> Divides abode with me
> No Friend have I that so persists
> As this Eternity. Vol.III, 1684

She goes a step further to assert that those who do not believe in the eternal life after death, are not yet fully alive.

Those not live yet
Who doubt to live again -
"Again" is of a twice
But this - is - one - Vol.III, 1454

The common belief is that life begins again after death but, in fact, life is a continuity which is not broken by death. Life in this world and life in heaven, are not two but one. Death is only a hyphen between mortality and immortality. The function of the hyphen is to connect and not to tear asunder the two. Thus man carries immortality in his immortal soul which, according to the poet, is a "costumeless consciousness" and remains the same before and after death. Once this truth is understood, eternity seems the only permanence which mortal human life has in all its identity.

How firm Eternity must look
To crumbling men like me
The only Adamant Estate
In all identity - Vol.III, 1499

In several of her poems, Emily Dickinson gives expression to her unshakable assurance in immortality. Pyramids and kingdoms may decay, as they surely do, but man has an immortal place which knows no decay.(Vol.II, 946). God did not light the abode of immortality by His breath only to put it out later (Vol.III, 1599). When everything is taken away from life, there is still immortality left and it is a "thing worth larceny"

(Vol.III, 1365). The best realized poem of this group is the one which focusses attention both on heaven and on earth and points out the predicament of human life in both.

Behind me - dips Eternity
Before me - Immortality -
Myself - the term between -
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,
Dissolving into Dawn away,
Before the West begin -

'Tis Kingdoms - afterward - they say -
In perfect - pauseless Monarchy
Whose Prince - is Son of None -
Himself - His Dateless Dynasty -
Himself - Himself diversify -
In Duplicate divine -

'Tis Miracle before Me - then -
'Tis Miracle behind - between
A Crescent in the Sea -
With Midnight to the North of Her -
And Midnight to the South of Her -
And Maelstrom - in the Sky - Vol.III, 721

Eternity is the timelessness that existed before her consciousness and immortality is the future timelessness in which her consciousness will continue. In between these two points, is her brief mortal existence, "the Term between". Death of the mortal life is the mist which dissolves into the dawn of immortality. In the second stanza, the poet focusses attention

on the Biblical kingdom of heaven and its perfect, perpetual serenity in which life will have perpetual abode. God, the prince of this kingdom, is the all pervading unity in all the multiplicity of the "Dynasty" and the "kingdoms", who Himself is the unity and diversity and is duplicated in all divine objects. In the concluding stanza, the poet returns to the miracle of eternity and immortality which lie before and after her consciousness. As compared to their changelessness, her mortal life is like the image of everchanging crescent in a turbulent sea, enveloped with darkness both in the north and south and threatened by a maelstrom likely to disfigure the image of the crescent.

The poem catches, with perfect artistic design, the law of mutability which engirths mortal existence and the changelessness of life in the kingdom of heaven. A life which is subject to change, is assailed by the violent agents of that change, and makes achievement of perfect repose difficult, if not altogether impossible. Contrested with this is the eternal repose in heaven which knows no motion and no end. Mortal life, therefore, must look forward to achieving in heaven what it cannot in this world. The idea, in its essence, is derived from the Bible's Book of Revelation, and its poetic formulation shows Emily Dickinson's indebtedness to the religious tradition in which she was born.[16]

16 Revelation was the most favourite book of the Bible to which she repeatedly fell back for spiritual sustenance.

In the preceding chapter, it has been shown that Emily Dickinson probed the mystery of death and felt an obsessive concern for a life which was so vulnerably exposed to it. In a world constantly marauded by death, immortality was the only permanence and source of self-assurance. Seen in its religious sense, immortality gave a new perspective to death, for death became the gateway to eternal life. Once this idea was fully perceived, Emily Dickinson explored its varied implications. It cannot be said that she did not waver in her faith and that doubts did not torment her soul. She expressed the agony of her soul metaphorically in the famous lines:

> Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
> That nibbles at the soul. Vol.II, 501

But she finally conquered her doubts and climbed out of the depths of her skepticism to walk in the sunshine of her belief and to sing in her inimitable voice of radiant joy:

> I live with Him - I hear His Voice
> I stand alive - Today - Vol.I, 463

Chapter X

EMILY DICKINSON AND MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

The title of this chapter is somewhat misleading, inadvertently perhaps, but nevertheless misleading. It raises the expectation that the writer of the thesis intends to trace the influence of Emily Dickinson on some modern American poets who may belong to the Dickinsonian tradition, as Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, and Allen Ginsberg are believed to be writing in the Whitmanian tradition. It is imperative, therefore, to make a direct statement that there is no Dickinsonian tradition in modern American poetry. This is not to say that Emily Dickinson was not great or significant enough as a poet to stimulate the continuance of her mode of writing poetry. Indeed, in many of her attitudes as in her technical innovations, she anticipated the modern temper more than any other poet of the nineteenth century. And yet her influence, even in formative years, has not been acknowledged by any modern American poet. Some of her most perceptive and sensitive critics[1] are also distinguished

1 Conrad Aiken, Allen Tate, Archibald MacLeish, John Crowe Ransom, Louise Bogan and Richard Wilbur have written appreciative essays to restore Emily Dickinson to the eminent position she holds today in the history of American poetry.

poets and still adorn the poetic spectrum of the present century. But their poetry does not reflect what they admire in Emily Dickinson.

It would be interesting to explore the possible reasons for this literary phenomenon and I crave your indulgence in doing so. Emily Dickionson's poetry was published too late to have any significant impact on modern poetry; the first authentic edition of her poems appeared only in 1955, now popularly known as the Harvard Edition. But this does not mean that her verse had not appeared before. A selonder volume, containing a hundred and sixteen poems, had been published as early as 1890, four years after the death of the poet, followed by two more equally meagre instalments in quick succession.[2] This practice of giving small quantities of Emily Dickinson's poetry was continued by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, in the present century[3] and the final volume of her new poems appeared ten years before the Harvard Edition.[4] The first three series of her poems, with

2 Poems by Emily Dickinson, First Series, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W.Higginson, 1890; Poems by Emily Dickinson, Second Series ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd and T.W.Higginson, 1891; Poems by Emily Dickinson, Third Series, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd, 1896.

3 The Single Hound, ed. by Martha Dickinson Bianchi, 1914; The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, 1924; Further Poems by Emily Dickinson, ed. by Martha Dickinson Bianchi and Alfred Leete Hampson, 1935.

4 Bolts of Melody : New Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. by Mabel Loomis Todd and Millicent Todd Bingham, 1945.

slight editorial changes in rhyme and punctuation, were received with considerable popular enthusiasm and, considering their quick sale, they were a great success. But the success of her poems was more or less on a popular basis, not entirely without the influence of the interest stimulated by the gossips about the mystery of her private life. There was no critical acceptance of her poetry. Even when such staunch victorians as T.W. Higginson modified their attitude,[5] there was no critical consensus worthy of note. Her poetry was, therefore, more a source of amused delight than an emblem of poetic achievement demanding critical attention from its readers. Her deviations from the accepted norms of poetry were deemed more as the idiosyncracies of a recluse rather than as the conscious poetical devices of a highly original poet on the threshold of technical innovations of far reaching significance. This attitude of her readers, set a limit to, if not altogether blocked, her appeal and influence as a poet.

Again, her poetry was not considered to be sophisticated enough worthy of emulation. Thematically, she was deemed to be a parochial poet whose limited range was further supposed to be narrowed by the circumscribed experiential evidence of a spinster who moved out of Amherst village only twice or thrice in her life and who had not even seen the sea. She was supposed to have, as

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5 "After all", Higginson wrote, "when a thought takes one's breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence." (Quoted by Conrad Aiken in his essay on Emily Dickinson).

even such an eminent critic as Blackmur has said and said it as late as 1956, "all the pangs ... of experience without the experience".[6] Blackmur's comment is a typical example of unperceptive literary judgement but it is symptomatic of an attitude which is our concern here. It took some time in the present century to discover that the regional and the cosmopolitan or the particular and the universal are not mutually exclusive. But in the tumult of thundering generalizations of the transcendentalists who could believe, even suspect, that there could be something abiding in the experience of the Amherst recluse? Besides, Emily Dickinson was considered to be riddled with limitations not only thematically but also even stylistically. It was easy to discover that the structure of her poetry derived from Watt's Christian Psalmody and his collection of The Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs. The hymn is the most ancient form of verse but is seldom used for long by great poets. How could Emily Dickinson write great poetry by employing such a simple and old form? Was it not another aspect of her limitation? The basic postulate behind these questions completely ignored the variations in the structural pattern of what Emily Dickinson had borrowed and of this we shall speak presently. But even in this matter the discovery was not made till quite late in the twentieth century. Perhaps, a full exploration of her conscious, artistic devices is

6 R.P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson's Notation", The Kenyan Review, Vol.18 (Spring, 1956).

still to be made and Emily Dickinson's influence as a poet cannot reasonably be expected to permeate till then.

Another reason may be discovered in the nature and extent of certain potent influences which shaped the trend of modern American poetry. These were, on the one hand, the French symbolist poets of the closing decades of the nineteenth century and, on the other, the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Mr. T.S. Eliot, the tallest figure among the modern literary critics and poets, extolled both and endeavoured, to establish, not without success, what he termed as the tradition of wit and thus sought to restore, perhaps even to rescue, the sensibility whose dissociation, according to him, had snapped the main link with the central tradition in English poetry. Mr. Eliot's pre-occupation with tradition and with the formulation of a critical basis for the kind of poetry that he wrote or wanted to write, diverted his attention from the examples nearer home which he could have readily found. He, like his distinguished compeer, Mr. Ezra Pound, took some notice of Whitman by making, at least, disparraging remarks about him. They completely ignored Emily Dickinson. And they were legislators, the acknowledged legislators, of modern poetry. They could have found in Emily Dickinson,more, perhaps, than in any other poet of the nineteenth century, something to their purpose. But they preferred to ignore and in doing so, they stood as a barrier between Emily Dickinson and modern American poetry.

II

It is a very well known fact that Emily Dickinson deliberately withheld the publication of her poems. Even when Mrs. Helen Hunt Jackson persistently implored her to "sing aloud", she did not relent. "How can you print a piece of your soul?",[6A] she said. "Publication is the auction of the mind of man", she wrote almost petulently in one of her poems.

> Publication - is the Auction
> Of the Mind of Man -
> Poverty - by justifying
> For so foul a thing
>
> Possibly - but We - would rather
> From Our Garret go
> White - Unto the White Creator -
> Than invest - Our Snow - Vol.II, 709

But this does not mean that she was indifferent to literary recognition. The fact that she wrote several poems on fame, is an evident pointer to the contrary. She was aware of her genius and knew that she was good as a poet. How else could she receive Higginson's conventional advice with a certain amount of polite deference without incorporating that advice into the body of her poetry? Indeed, she knew that she could not escape fame which

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6A Richard B. Sewall, Emily Dickinson, p. 129.

must overtake her sooner or later. "If fame belonged to me," she wrote to Higginson, "I could not escape her - if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase."[6B] How else could she confide to Sister Sue that her kinsfolk would be proud of her "sometime"? And yet she refused, to some even obstinately, the publication of her poetry.

The reason is not far to seek. True, she had not read contemporary poetry, except that of Emerson, with some attention. But she read the poems published in The Republican[7] and she must have marked the difference between them and her own poems. It did not require a great deal of mental acuteness on her part to realize that the conception of poetry of her age, dominated as it was by the transcendentalists, was an antithesis of her own. She must have been considerably put off by the rigid formalism of some of the poets who were widely admired. It was natural, therefore, that she developed legitimate fear that her poetry would not be understood and would never be properly analysed and valued.

She had tested her poems on her friends, on J.G.Holland, on Samaul Bowles and on T.W. Higginson. She sent them her poems incorporated in the notes accompanying small gifts. They had professional interest in literature. But they all failed her. They all recognized the originality of her poems. They even admired the newness of her thought or the turn of her precise expression.

6B Letters, Vol.II, p. 408.

7 The Springfield Daily Republican, edited by Samaul Bowles, to which the Dickinson family subscribed.

But they all shook their heads in disapproval and thought that her poetry was too startlingly original to be accepted by the reading public. They were bothered by the liberties she took with the accepted norms of poetry and were puzzled by the innovations in rhyme and meter. These friends served as the critical forum and by their reaction and response to her poetry, she was able to deduce that her poetry was not for her age. She folded the fair copies of her poems in little "volumes" which according to her, were her unposted letters to posterity. She wrote in one of her poems, in another context, but which has relevance to her belief in her poetic fame:

> Burden - borne so far triumphant -
> None suspect me of the crown,
> For I wear the "Thorns" till Sunset -
> Then - my Diadem put on. Vol.III, 1737

She had borne the agony of the creative activity of a poet during her life-time with success, although none of her contemporaries could even suspect of her triumph and of her consequent future destiny as a poet. She had worn the crown of thorne till her death (sunset) but she would put on her diadem soon after. Indeed, one admires the precision with which these lines predicted the course of her literary recognition.

Emily Dickinson's radical divergence from the prevalent contemporary taste was indicative of the forward looking nature of her poetry.[7] Some of her distinguished conteporaries, all older

7 The history of English and American poetry furnishes many examples of rebel poets who heralded the new trends of the future. Blake and Whitman are illustrations to the point.

than herself, were Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes and Whitman. But we seldom think of her contemporaries when we think of her. We like to think of her as a modern poet or as a poet who has direct relevance to the present poetic practices. It is not because of her recognition as a poet in the twentieth century; it is primarily because her poetry is far removed from that of her contemporaries, not in point of time, but in its thematic and stylistic experiments and its formulation of the poetic idiom. Her poetry anticipates, in a variety of ways, some of the notable innovations of modern poetry and deserves our attention.

III

Even a cursory glance at Emily Dickinson's poetry would reveal the extraordinary importance she attached to the precise word in poetry. The Harvard Edition of her poems in printing the work sheets with even the undertermined final choice from numerous alternatives, provides ample opportunity to the reader to see for himself how carefully she chose her words to achieve precise identity with her thought. The best example to illustrate her method of composition has been quoted by one of her editors and biographers[9]

9 Millicent Todd Bingham; Ancestors Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson, (Harper, New York, 1945), p. 37.

> Had but the tale a (thrilling, typic, hearty, bonnie,
> breathless, spacious, tropic, warbling, ardent,
> friendly, magic, pungent, winning, mellow) teller
> All the boys would come -
> Orpheus's sermon captivated,
> It did not condemn.

The poet had left all the fourteen alternatives without making a choice although the adjective warbling, chosen by the editor, seems the inevitable choice because of the poet's reference to Orpheus in the third line. This meticulous care in providing alternatives for her option, was born out of her awareness of the power of the word in communication.[9A] Employing an unusual metaphor, she said in one of her poems:

> There is a word
> Which bears a sword
> Can pierce an armed man.
> It hurls its barbed syllables, - Vol.I, 45

Again, she expressed the idea, this time in a similar startling simile.

> She dealt her pretty words like blades,
> As glittering they shone,
> And every one unbared a nerve
> Or wantoned with a bone. Vol.I, 29

It is significant that almost all her poems on words were written early and are contained in the first volume of the Harvard

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9A For a fuller discussion, see Chapter II.

Edition. As she withdrew from the world to concentrate on poetry, she felt the inadequacy of her vocabulary. "For several years",she wrote to Higginson in retrospect, "my Lexicon - was my only companion". Higginson failed to understand its meaning and deduced from it her loneliness which apparently was not the intention. What she wanted to say was that she was not taught by friends but learnt the difficult art of writing poetry by studying words. She alluded to this practice later when she wrote about her "Easing my famine / At my Lexicon". Famine, indeed, there must have been for she had, as Richard Wilbur said, "sent her whole Calvinistic vocabulary into exile"[10] and she had to discover a new one to write her poems.

A similar need for precise words was felt by the imagist poets who emerged at the close of the first decade of the twentieth century. The "Imagist" anthologies, edited by Ezra Pound appeared in 1913 and although T.E.Hulme was its first contributor, its members, at one time or other, were Amy Lowell, F.S. Flint, H.D., J.G. Fletcher, Richard Aldington, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound himself. The 'manifesto' of the imagist movement consisted some of the following rules which deserve to be quoted in full.

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not merely the decorative word.

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10 Emily Dickinson: Three Views, (Amherst, 1960), p. 1.

2. To create new rythms - as the expression of new moods... .
3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subjects.
4. To present an image. We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal with vague generalities.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred and indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is the very essence of poetry.[11]

Influenced by this movement, Pound formulated his theory of "Ching Ming" by borrowing the fundamental concept from Confucius, which in its essence meant "call things by their right names." Had the Harvard Edition of Emily Dickinson's poems, or even Bolts of Melody been available in 1913, Pound could have illustrated all the rules of the imagist movement by examples from her poetry. Lest it may be considered an exaggerated statement, let us examine some of the examples.

We have already commented on Emily Dickinson's choice of words, for poetry, apart from other things, is primarily an exploration of the possibilities of language. Like the French symbolists, the modern American poets felt the need of concentrating on sense impression and its exact description, in a world in which moral, intellectual and aesthetic values were all uncertain. A

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11 "Imagism", Poetry, Vol.I, No.6, 1913, p.199.

good descriptive poem must enable the reader to be more articulate and to perceive more clearly the object of description. One of the motivations of the imagist movement was to fill the gap caused by the decline of the descriptive poetry. To illustrate the first, fifth and sixth rules of the imagist movement, let us consider one of the well-known poems of Emily Dickinson.

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel -
A Resonance of Emerald -
A Rush of Cochineal -
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head -
The mail from Tunis probably,
An easy morning's Ride - Vol.III, 1463

I do not need to point out the exactness of the description of the hummingbird. What surprises most is the veracity with which the poet captures the elusive speed of the bird with the arrangement of words. A comparison with an earlier poem, "Within my Garden, rides a Bird / Upon a single Wheel -" would show the concentration with which she reshaped the later version of the poem quoted above. Many more examples can be given[12] and I would have given them if I had the time and space.

It was not in her nature poems alone that exact and precise words were employed for description. In one of her poems on death, a pre-vision of her own death, the verbal precision is equally remarkable.

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12 A comparison between "The Wind begun to rock the Grass", Vol.II (824), and "It sounded as if the Streets were running", Vol.III (1397), describing a storm, will show Emily Dickinson's skill in concentration.

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my keepsakes - signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable - and then it was
There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain stumbling Buzz -
Between the light - and me -
And then the Windows failed - and then
I could not see to see -

In a similar manner, her adriot utterance displays a strategy of paradox in her description of heaven, "That if it be, it be at best / An ablative estate -", or again she describes heaven as

The House of Supposition
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps - ... Vol. II, 696

It is difficult to imagine any other poet of the nineteenth century who could have written these lines; transforming an adverb (Perhaps) into a noun, somewhat in the manner of E.E. Cummings.

Another essential requirement for an imagist poet was to

present an image. An image helps to crystalise the concrete as against vague and, sometimes, even chaotic generalities. Similies and metaphors have always been used in poetry, for their use is fundamental to civilized speech. But a simile or metaphor which is commonplace is likely to produce the effect of dilution or long-windedness. The imagists were more concerned with vivid, graphic delineation and their presentation of image made startling use of metaphors and similies. In this respect, too, Emily Dickinson anticipated the poetic technique of the imagists. Indeed, she invariably thought in images. Here is a desctiption of the spring season.

> Baffled for just a day or two -
> Embarrassed - not afraid -
> Encounter in my garden
> An unexpected Maid. Vol.I, 17

The description of the hesitant, almost tentative approach of the spring season and then the sudden blossoming forth, find a startlingly precise equivalent in the image of the unexpected maid. Again, notice the unusual simile in the description of winter.

> Like Brooms of Steel
> The Snow and Wind
> Had swept the Winter Street - Vol.II, 1252

But the best example can be found in one of the poems she wrote on sunset.

Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky
Then at the feet of the old Horizon
Laying its spotted Face to die
Stooping as low as the Ottor's Window
Touching the Roof and tinting the Barn
Kissing its Bonnet to the Meadow
And the juggler of Day is gone. Vol.I, 228

Emily Dickinson employs two images for the sun, both equally apt and witty. The sun leaps like a leopard whose bright yellow skin with black spots are matched with the golden blaze and the spotted dimness of sunlight seen at sunset. The sun is also the juggler who manipulates the show of the day but finally bows out in the evening. Both these images please by their wit as they surprise by their precision.

Emily Dickinson did not write free verse or a cadenced verse free from rhyme and meter but she made extensive use of new metrical patterns and added four types of rhymes to the existing two, as it has been clearly demonstrated by Professor Johnson.[13] Her predecessors used exact rhyme or in rare cases, eye rhyme (home-come). She further used identical rhymes (come-become), imperfect rhymes, identical vowels followed by different consonants (morn, done), vowel rhymes (see-buy) and suspended rhyme, different vowels followed by identical consonants (things, along). She also used internal rhymes in the same line (I never

13 See the chapter "The Poet and the Muse : Poetry as Art" in Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography by Thomas H.Johnson, Harvard Univ. Press, 1955.

told the buried gold) to produce effects which could not be achieved otherwise. She borrowed the common, the long and the short iambic meters, with four lines stanzas and with respective syllabic schemes 8,6, 8,6; 8,8, 8,8; and 6,6, 8,6, from English hymnology. The trochaic meters are sevens, eights and sevens, eights and fives, sevens and fives, sixes and fives, and sixes and the dactyle meters are elevens, elevens and tens, and tens and nines. Within the framework, Emily Dickinson introduced several variations. It is not possible to give all the examples but the following poem would give some idea of her innovations.

I ne/ver lost/ as much / but twice /
And that / was in / the sod /
Twice have / I stood / a be/ggar
Before / the door / of God.

Angels / - twice de/scending /
Reim/bursed my / store
Burglar! / Banker / - Father! /
I am / poor once / more

The first stanza employs iambic common meter but the third line is catalectic to break the monotony. To catch her mood, she changes over to trochaic meter of sixes and fives in the second stanza and balances the irregularity by exact rhymes. If the intention of the imagists was to express new moods by creating new rythms, Emily Dickinson does so without recourse to free

verse. From the preceding analysis, it follows that Emily Dickinson's poetry embodies all the tenets of the imagist movement and she can legitimately be considered as a pre-imagist poet. One wonders if Mr. Pound or Mr. Eliot ever noticed the resemblences after the publication of the Harvard Edition of 1955.

IV

The use of new syllabic patterns was not limited to the imagists but was used by poets much later. Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, E.E. Cummings and, in recent years, Barbara Howes, Howard Nemerov, to name a few, have made discoveries in rhyme and syllabic patterns in which Emily Dickinson did the pioneering work. Marianne Moore, E.E. Cunnings and Gregory Corso have experimented with punctuation to facilitate the communication of the poet's emphasis, pause or disapproval. Thus the idiosyncratic dashes and capital letters of Emily Dickinson have been carried to a much farther extreme, even when the reader has been visibly annoyed by them. The modern American poet, since the first World War, has tended more and more to be a poet of the private self and has shown an increasing concern for the responses of the inner self, almost in the manner of Emily Dickinson. The poet of today is more introspective, more analytical, and under the influence of the French symbolist poets, more diligent in trying to express the inexpressible. He does not, however, think

that in all these matters he has a predecessor in Emily Dickinson.

In certain broad attitudes, too, Emily Dickinson was a forerunner of the moderns. Mr. Pound accepted Flaubert's doctrine of the impersonality of the artist and said that "the momentum of his art should heave him out of himself." Mr. Eliot elaborated the idea further in his famous comment that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from it." The objectivity which the modern poet has achieved by conscious effort to cast off the involvement of the self, came naturally to Emily Dickinson. Commenting on the chaos of a change of residence, she wrote when in her twenties:

> "I took at the time a memorandum of my several senses, and also of my hat and coat and my best shoes - but it was lost in the melee, and I am out with lanterns looking for myself."

Her gift to take stock of herself as if she were some other person, was her habitual way of looking at things and at herself as a poet. Even when she was writing about matters which primarily concerned her, matters which were autobiographical, she displayed her characteristic detachment.

> I can wade Grief -
> Whole Pools of it -
> I'm used to that -
> But the least push of joy
> Breaks up my feet -
> And I tip - drunken Vol.I, 252

It is evident that the poet is both in the poem as well as out of it and it is this characteristic which makes the lines truly moving.

In her poems on nature, too, she approximates the modern attitude. She saw nature, like the modern poet, shorn of all sentimentality. She rejected the transcendentalist merger of man, nature and God and ridiculed those who believed that the grand spectacle of nature was ordained for man.

> A little Madness in the Spring
> Is wholesome even for the King,
> But God be with the Clown -
> Who ponders this tremendous scene -
> This whole Experiment of Green
> As if it were this own! Vol.III, 1333

In matters of religious belief, also, she rejected the unquestioning faith of the devout. Her belief bristles with doubt and even in trying to grasp some of the religious abstractions, she carried her rational mode of thinking to its utmost limits. She talked about God in the most familiar terms and coined adjectives for Him which would shock the pious.

In glorifying the metaphysical poets, Mr. Eliot wanted to establish, or rather to reestablish, the tradition of wit in modern English and American poetry. Although not quite in the manner of the mataphysicals, wit has continued to be the touchstone of modern poetry. Wit is closely aligned to detachment and an

unexpected turn of phrase or argument, leads to sudden and new insights, not possible to achieve otherwise by direct and straight-forward statement. Wit, therefore, adds an extra-dimension to the view the poet wishes to express, just as it registers a sharp impact on the mind of the reader. Emily Dickinson's poetry is constantly enlivened with wit. Even in writing on serious subjects, she displayed her witty mode of thought.

> The abdication of Belief
> Makes the Behaviour small -
> Better an ignis fatuus
> Than no illume at all. Vol.III, 1551

Thus we can say in conclusion that Emily Dickinson anticipated some of the most dominant characteristics and attitudes of modern American poetry. For various reasons, already discussed earlier, her mode of writing does not survive in the poets of the twentieth century. But in reading her poetry, one is often reminded of modern themes and technique of poetry. Is it any wonder then that we like to think of her as a modern poet?

Chapter XI

HERSELF

Emily Dickinson was born at a time when the literary scene in America was dominated by the powerful transcendentalist poets. Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier and Holmes were in their twenties but had made their mark. Bryant, then in his late thirties, was already famous. Whitman, senior to her by eleven years, had not yet published poetry but had started his apprenticeship which led to the blossoming forth of his genius in Leaves of Grass. By the time she seriously dedicated herself to the writing of poetry, all these names were celebrieties, and their fame had travelled beyond their own country. And yet when one thinks of Emily Dickinson, it is seldom in association with her contemporaries. When the first instalment of her poems appeared in 1890, four years after her death, Whittier and Whitman were still alive. In spite of the generous praise that Leaves of Grass had received from Emerson, Whitman's innovations in poetry had not found acceptance by the practising poets or readers. Indeed, Whittier indignantly threw his copy of Leaves of Grass into fire and Abraham Lincoln had carried the first edition of that book to his office to save it

from being "purified by fire" by the women in the house.[1] These facts indicate the poetic taste of the time, which definitely tended to be hostile to radical ideas in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson's recognition as a poet did not come till the second decade of the twentieth century. That explains why we like to think of her as a modern poet, or at least a poet whose poetry is far removed from that of her contemporaries, not in point of time, but in its thematic and stylistic experiments and poetic idiom. In poetry, her voice was the most startlingly original in the nineteenth century.

The second of the three children of Edward Dickinson, she was born in 1830 at Amherst in a brick house which was built by her grandfather. Her father was a law graduate of Yale College and had a successful career as a lawyer. He was a prosperous man and held various posts of social responsibility. He was the treasurer of Amherst Academy and took prominent part in social and political activities and served as a member of the legislature of the Massachusetts and was elected to the national Congress for one term. He is generally considered to be a very domineering, almost a formidable personality, who dominated the lives of his children. But this is rather an exaggerated view. The truth of the matter is that he was a very affectionate father and the warmth of his deep feeling for his

1 See Geoffrey Dutton; Watt Whitman, (London, 1961), p.21.

children made him protective, particularly towards the two younger children who were both daughters. But the children were allowed the maximum freedom within the austere framework of Christian ethics. The eldest child and the only son, William Austin Dickinson, seems to have occasional bouts of difference of opinion with his father, although it never impaired their relationship in any way. Emily Dickinson has jokingly referred to these mild clashes between the father and the son as "fisticuff". In several of her letters, she good humouredly made fun of her father while reporting his uneasiness on Austin's going away from home to pursue his studies or teach school at Harvard. In one of her letters, she writes:[2]

> "Father is as uneasy when you are gone away as if you catch a trout and put him in Sahara".

Again, she writes:

> "Father's prayers for you at our morning devotions are enough to break one's heart - it is really very touching."[3]

She has made a fuller and a more touching report in another letter:[4]

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2 Letters, Vol. I, p. 119.
3 Ibid., Vol.I, p. 111.
4 Ibid., Vol.I, p. 231.

> "Father takes great delight in your remarks to him - puts on his spectacles and reads them o'er and o'er as if it was a blessing to have an only son. He reads all the letters you write, as soon as he gets them, at the post office, no matter to whom addressed ... and when he gets home in the evening, he cracks a few walnuts, puts his spectacles on, and with your last in his hand, sits down to enjoy the evening... I do think it's so funny, you and father do nothing but "fisticuff" all the while you're at home, and the minute you are separated, you become such devoted friends".

One wonders if such a father can in any real sense of the word be called 'formidable'.

There are other evidences too which are incongruous with the puritan image of Edward Dickinson. He owned and drove the fastest horse in Amherst. During his student days, he was, at least once, frowned upon for having liberally downed more of apple brandy than he could normally contain. On one occasion, he rang the church bell for the citizens of Amherst to come out and witness aurora borealis. His daughter has left a faithful record of the event.[5]

> "There was quite an excitement in the Monday evening. We were all startled by a violent church-bell ringing ... The sky was a beautiful red, bordering on a crimson and rays of gold pink color were constantly shooting

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5 Jay Leyda, Vol.I, p. 214. This letter is not included in the Harvard Edition of her 3 Vol. letters.

> off from a kind of sun in the centre... Father happened to see it among the very first, and rang the bell himself to call attention at it."

After her father's death, Emily Dickinson also recorded a very endearing act of his kindliness which exemplifies more than his Christian charity and the normal code of humane behaviour.[6]

> "The last April that father lived, lived I mean below, there were several snow storms, and the birds were so frightened and cold they sat by the kitchen door. Father went to the barn in his slippers and came back with a breakfast of grain for each, and hid himself while he scattered it, lest it embarass them. Ignorant of the name or fate of their benefactor, their descendants are singing this afternoon."

These vignettes of Edward Dickinson do not confirm the unperceptive view of Higginson who found him "dry and speechless."[7] There can be no doubt that he took life seriously and carried out his duties energetically and with determination.

Edward Dickinson was one of the major shaping forces of Emily's life. It was from him that she inherited an unimpeachable integrity of character, which at times seemed ruthless. She also shared with him his religions beliefs and his gods were her gods as well. Again, it was from him that she inherited deep attachment for the family circle and continued

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6 Ibid., Vol.II,pp.219-220.This letter is also not included in Letters.

7 Ibid., Vol.II, p.153.

the almost clanish interdependence of the Dickinsons. Apart from the creative activity of a poet, she owed a good deal of her thought and belief to her father. And it is wrong to believe, I think, that the father's influence was inhibitive. If he disapproved of certain modes of behaviour or frowned upon some of the liberal writers or poets, it was more in the nature of the expression of his views to a small, loving circle of his family, than a desire to dominate its members. He bought books for his children, although he gave the books as gifts with the free and unsolicited advice not to read them. Such advice, one hopes, was given more in a mood of light heartedness than actual sobriety. If Emily Dickinson, during her frequent illnesses, found her father over-zealous in administering the unsavoury potions of medicine, it was not he, but the large size of the potions of those days, which were to be blamed. Her father high-lighted, in his practical life, some of the crucial religious and ethical problems and, by sharing them and in trying to solve them, she gained considerable knowledge of the current thinking on those problems. One often wonders at her comparatively vast knowledge and a considerable fund of wisdom she gained in her secluded and protected life. Her father was one of the sources of this knowledge and wisdom.

She was also influenced with her brother, William Austin Dickinson, and shared his good taste and enthusiasm in the enjoyment of poetry and music. She wrote some of her most

delightful letters to him, adopting invariably a bantering tone. These letters have also provided most valuable information about her father as well as about her own girlhood. The first volume of the three volume Harvard Edition of her letters opens with a letter to Austin, which she wrote at the age of twelve. Free from punctuation and the commonplace rules of grammar, it is a remarkable document which expresses with precision whatever she wished to write to her brother. "We miss you very much", she says, at one place, "indeed you cannot think how odd it seems without you there was always such a Hurrah wherever you was".[8] Austin finally settled down in Amherst as his father's neighbour and ultimately succeeded his father as a competent lawyer and a leading citizen. His affection for his sisters continued without any show of decline and he was in the habit of spending some time with them every day, playing on the piano or listening to them while they played. But gradually his profession made great demand on his time and his interest in literature, particularly in poetry, declined, but his devoted admiration for the talent of Emily Dickinson unfailingly remained.

Emily Dickinson's younger sister, Lavinia Dickinson, also loved her dearly. She also did not marry and shared with her sister the major part of the household duties. Emily had a big dog, Carlo, given to her by her father, while Lavinia's pet

8 Letters, Vol. I, p.3.

animals were cats who grew in numbers periodically. It is not on record that the two sisters ever openly clashed or expressed their annoyance but, at least once, Emily confided to a friend in a letter written in 1881: "Vinnie had four Pussies for Chrismas Gifts - and two from her Maker, previous, making six, in toto, and finding Assassins for them, is my stealthy Aim."[9] It is apparent that the letter expresses more good humoured amusement than any real annoyance. Again, in a similar mood, she describes the annoyance of her sister when she was punctually awakened by Emily Dickinson:[10]

> "... there's nothing that I enjoy more than rousing these self-same beings and witnessing their discomfiture at the bare idea of morning, when they're so sleepy yet!
>
> "Vinnie thinks me quite savage, and frequently suggests the propriety of having me transported to some barbarous country, where I may meet with those of a similar nature, and allow her to spend her days - that is, such small remainder as my inhumanity spares - in comparative ease and quietness!"

That there was deep affection between the two sisters is proved by the loving concern of Lavinia with which she handled the publication of Emily's poems and sought the help of various trustworthy friends to edit them after her sister's death. Indeed, without her care, the treasure of Emily Dickinson's

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9 Ibid., Vol.III, p. 687.
10 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 163.

poetry would have been lost altogether.

Emily Dickinson's sister-in-law, Susan Austin Dickinson, was also a distinguished member of the beloved family circle. Emily had known her from the days when both were students of Amherst Academy and their friendship grew in intensity as Susan was engaged and finally married to Austin in 1856. She became "sister Sue" and a trusted friend to whom Emily confided the burden of her heart and showed her the largest number of poems. Sue had a cultivated mind and her wit, combined with exuberant narrative, made her famous as one of the most admired hostesses of Amherst. Her deviations from truth for the sake of picturesque narration often embarrassed her husband and infuriated Lavinia. She had a powerful imagination and her taste in poetry and music was the same as that of Emily Dickinson who often sent poems to her for comment and advice. We do not know what advice she gave and no specimen of it has survived in her or Emily Dickinson's correspondence, but it is safe to presume that she admired and encouraged Emily Dickinson's creative activity. She also seemed to persuade Emily to join the church and Emily's famous letter said:[11]

> "Sue - you can go or stay - there is but one alternative - We differ often lately, and this must be the last.
> You need/not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved,...

11 Ibid., Vol.I, pp. 305-306. See also Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 17, and also Jay Leyda, pp. 317-318.

> We have walked very pleasantly - Perhaps this is the point at which our paths diverge - then pass on singing Sue, and up the distant hill I journey on."

The letter indicates that the persuation was strong enough to evoke an equally emphatic reply. Sister Sue is, thus, another influence to be reckoned with. In later years, the warmth of affection between the two friends cooled down to a very great extent but that does not minimize Sue's impact on Emily's thought and writings during the most fruitful years of her life.

II

Emily Dickinson received formal education at Amherst Academy and, for a year, at Mount Holyoke Seminary. In later years she wrote to Higginson that she went to school "but in your manner of the phrase had no education".[12] What she actually meant by this statement was that her studies at these two institutions had taught her little as compared to the knowledge she gained by her independent efforts later. Considering the nature of education that ladies received in those days, Emily Dickinson's schooling was reasonably sound. At Amherst Academy, she studied history and botany, in addition to Latin and English and carried French as an extra subject or course. During at least one term,

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12 Ibid., Vol.II, p. 404.

she also read German. She received instruction in music and practised at the piano for two hours every day. Before leaving Amherst Academy, she also studied Ecclesiastical history, algebra and Euclid, and other subjects of natural sciences. Botany seems to be a subject which interested her very much and she applied her theoritical knowledge in gardening and gained intimate information about some of the flowers which were favourites in Amherst homes.

In 1847, Emily Dickinson entered Mount Holyoke Seminary. It was customary in those days to examine the state of spiritual health of the students. They were classified into three categories: they were either professing christians, or "had hope" or were "without hope". Emily Dickinson belonged to the third category which consisted of about twentyfive students in a total enrolment of two hundred and thirtyfive. No compulsion was used to convert those "without hope" and even their attendance at religious meetings was not compulsory. But appeals were made periodically for their own spiritual well-being and the atmosphere at the institution grew tense, creating a sense of guilt in the mind and heart of the non-believers. Emily Dickinson wrote several letters to Abiah Root making an honest confession of her situation at Mount Holyoke and bewailing her inability to inculcate in her the same religious feelings which she found manifest in all her classmates. In one of her letters she wrote:[13]

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13 Jay Leyda, Vol.I, pp. 144-145. The quoted passage has been deleted from Letters, Vol.I, p.66.

> "Abiah, you may be surprised to hear me speak as I do, knowing that I express no interest in the all-important subject, but I am not happy, and I regret that last term, when the golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up and become a Christian. It is now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world."

She envied Abiah Root on her conversion and thought that religion made Abiah's face full of radiance and joy and deplored the fact that she herself was the lingering bad one who "pause and ponder and ponder and pause"[14] without finding a sincere and stable belief in religion.

Emily Dickinson's experience at Mount Holyoke Seminary epitomizes her sense of inadequacy which persisted, in varying degree, till the closing decade of her life. But the anguish of her soul is evident from all those letters which she wrote to Abiah Root, Jane Humphroy and "Sister Sue", for hers was primarily a religious mind, nurtured in the natural piety right from her childhood. When she wrote that "The path of duty looks very ugly indeed, and ... it is so much easier to do wrong than right, so much pleasanter to be evil than good";[15] we know that she was on the side of duty and right and good. Again, she wrote to Jane Humphrey in a letter already quoted in chapter VII:

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14 Letters, Vol. I, p. 98.

15 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 82.

> "Christ is calling everyone here... and I am standing alone... You must pray when the rest are sleeping, that the hand may be held to me, and I may be led away".

It is difficult not to perceive in this letter a basic and sincere desire to believe in Christ whom she loved intensely without formally professing her faith in Christianity. Her trouble in matters of religious belief seems to be that she was unable to accept the orthodoxies as they were preached every week from the pulpit, for such orthodoxies were without the animating spirit which Emily Dickinson sought to discover and confirm through her rational mind. It would be wrong to think, however, that she was some kind of a heretic. Her skepticism was only on the outer fringe where she was confronted with the pretension of the devout who professed their belief without actually understanding what they believed.

During the years of her life as a student, Emily Dickinson seemed to have read nothing which could be considered as a major influence on her poetry. The only evidence we have shows that she was a member of a Shakespeare study circle which discussed Shakespeare's plays and its members gave occasional readings from them. Her intimate knowledge of Shakespeare was or seems to be the only notable achievement of her formative years. The anthologies of English literature used in the courses in English must have included all the major poets like

Chaucer, Spenser and Milton. The early romantic poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, must also have figured on the reading list. But we know nothing of Emily Dickinson's interest in these poets. Much later in life, she made brief references to Byron, Keats, Tennyson, Browning and Mrs. Browning, Charlotte and Emily Bronte and George Eliot but there is no evidence to determine the date or the extent of her readings. She read Emerson after her return to Amherst from Mount Holyoke Seminary but it is doubtful if she was deeply impressed by him. The truth of the matter seems to be that she wrote poetry from a fresh impulse and without literary precedents which critics of her poetry very much like to explore. In this respect, she was like Robert Burns or William Blake who forged a new poetic idiom by the sheer force of their genius. Nearer home in America, there were many more examples of a similar nature. Among her contemporaries, Walt Whitman's contribution to poetry is amazing, considering that he had almost no formal education and had no opportunity to acquaint himself with the great masterpieces of poetic composition. If there was any influence on Emily Dickinson's poetry, it was that of the Bible and the hymns from which she sometimes borrowed the outer structure of her poems.

III

The most difficult part of a biographical note on Emily Dickinson, is to reconstruct her emotional life. I have already

mentioned some of the conjectures that have been made about her possible emotional involvements. When these conjectures are examined in the light of available evidence, they do not seem to have any basis in fact. And yet it is also not possible to deny that Emily Dickinson had undergone some kind of an emotional and spiritual crisis from which she did not wholly recover till the end. During the years of her protracted illness, she often spoke metaphorically of her private sorrow as "that old nail in my breast",[16] and those who knew understood. We have no possible source to know what she meant. Again, she wrote:[17]

> A book I have a friend gave
> Whose pencil, here and there,
> Had notched the place that pleased him,
> At rest his fingers are.
>
> Now, when I read, I read not,
> For interrupting tears
> Obliterate the etchings
> Too costly for repairs.

We would very much like to know the person who had made the gift of the book to her and also the passages which he had marked. But in spite of the controversies which have raged since the publication of the first instalment of her poetry in 1890, no conclusive evidence has identified the shadowy

16 Whicher, This was a Poet, p. 95.

17 The poem has been quoted by Whicher in This was a Poet, p. 94, but does not figure in the Harvard Edition.

person of her poem.

In examining the evidence, we are further discouraged by the fact that Emily Dickinson, sometimes, indulged in harmless self-dramatization and presented imaginary events as real. In one of her poems, she has dwelt upon such a possibility.[18]

> The vision, pondered long,
> So plausible becomes
> That I esteem the fiction real -
> The real, ficticious seems.

One wonders if this can be applied to the existence of person or persons with whom she was supposed to have been in love. In later life, she often liked to say quietly that the beloved of her poems is no one other than God. I have already pointed out in chapter VII that in many of her love poems, it is impossible to determine whether the love expressed is profane or divine. Thus our search for the identification of her love is further complicated and it becomes all the more difficult to say anything with confidence. I have not even mentioned the names of George Gould, a classmate and friend of her brother, or Major Edward B. Hunt, husband of her friend Helen Hunt Jackson, who were once considered to be the men with whom she had fallen in love. The case of Benjamin Franklin Newton is also a weak one

18 Ibid., p. 98. This poem also is not included in the Harvard Edition.

and does not warrant the conclusions which the late Professor George Frisbie Whicher had drawn in his book, This Was a Poet. The only person who remains is Rev. Charles Wadsworth about whom I have already offered comments and there is nothing significant left to add, except perhaps his last meeting with Emily Dickinson in 1880 as it has been described by Professor Whicher. Wadsworth made an unexpected call one summer evening in 1880 and Lavinia who answered the ring, ran in excitement and announced to her sister, "The gentleman with the deep voice wants to see you, Emily". Emily Dickinson went to meet him and in the commonplace small talk that followed she asked him how long it took to make the journey (from Philadelphia to Amherst). "Twenty years", said Wadsworth, with inscrutable roguery.[19] Perhaps, that was a humorous way of describing the tedious and slow journey which he had undertaken. But it can also be taken as a confession of love whose worth he took twenty years to realize. It must be remembered, however, that Emily Dickinson's love for Wadsworth was of a very unusual nature. It seems that it was not the person but his image which her mind had created, which she adored. Any analysis of their relationship in terms of what we understand by the term "love-affair", would be a very misleading and unwarranted fallacy.

Among her friends to whom she sent her poems or shared her interest in literature were Samuel Bowles, Josiah Gilbert Holland,

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19 Ibid., p. 110.

Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Helen Hunt Jackson. They had all a professional interest in literature and, except Helen Hunt Jackson, all disapproved the publication of her poetry. This is not to say that they did not perceive the originality or the literary merit of her poems but their disapproval was more or less on the score of liberties that Emily Dickinson had taken with the accepted technique of poetry, and they feared that her poetry would not find acceptance with the reading public. Helen Hunt Jackson was the only person who enthusiastically greeted her as a great poet and persistently implored her to publish her poems. In the face of more weighty verdicts, Emily Dickinson ignored or did not attach enough importance to Helen Hunt Jackson's opinion and decided to remain in obscurity during her life-time. One wonders about the possible reaction of the critics and the reading public if her poetry had been published, for there is no doubt that the conception of poetry of the age, dominated by transcendentalist poets, was almost an antithesis of her own. In a limited sense, it was a blessing in disguise that her poetry remained unmutilated till it was restored in its original integrity by Professor Thomas H. Johnson in the monumental Harvard Edition.

Samuel Bowels was born in 1826 and took over the weekly, Republican, from his father in 1840. By 1844 he expanded it into The Springfield Daily Republican and by 1860 made it national in scope. The clarity and power of his editorials

earned him considerable fame and he became one of the leading journalists of New England. He was a friend of William Austin Dickinson and a frequent visitor to the social circle in Amherst. Emily Dickinson had great affection and respect for this brilliant and articulate journalist who was senior to her only by four years. All her other men friends were much older people with whom she could hardly speak with the same frankness and candour with which she conversed with Samuel Bowles. His premature death in 1878 was a great personal loss to her and she made touching references to him in her letters to Mrs. Bowles. Theodora Ward, in her book The Capsule of the Mind, has indirectly suggested that Emily Dickinson was in love with him and has quoted from some of her letters which point to a depth in their relationship not very usual in friendship. It is difficult to agree with this suggestion and considering the intimacy he had with William Austin Dickinson and the deep admiration that he expressed for Mrs. Susan Austin Dickinson, it was unlikely that he harboured anything more than friendship for Emily Dickinson. He was a gallant man and had many distinguished ladies among his friends but it is improbable that his gallantry extended to flirtation or a relationship which was not honourable towards the favourite sister of his dear friend, William Austin Dickinson. A story is related how he once came on a visit and finding Emily confined to her attic room, called out: "Emily, you damned rascal. No more of this nonsense! I've travelled

all the way from Springfield to see you. Come down at once."[20] It is said that Emily Dickinson complied with this friendly command. If this is a true story, one can see that Bowles used a language which is not the language used by lovers on such occasions.

Emily Dickinson also admired J.G.Holland, "the Doctor", as she called him, but more than him, she loved and respected Mrs. Holland for her candid wisdom and sweet temper. Holland was known to the Dickinson family circle by his writings in the Springfield Republican and met Emily and others in 1851 when he was awarded the honorary degree of A.M. by Amherst College. Since then, he kept up his close relationship as a friend till his death. He was a frequent visitor at Dickinson homestead and was invariably accompanied by his charming wife. A large number of Emily's letters were addressed to Mrs. Holland whom she loved to call "sweet sister". Emily Dickinson often sent little gifts to them and often sent her poems incorporated in the note accompanying such gifts, particularly of flowers. Dr. Holland read her poems with amused enjoyment, noting the newness of thought or turn of expression which her poems embodied. But he thought her poems too startlingly original to be published.

In 1862, Atlantic Monthly published an article by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, entitled "Letter to a Young Contributor",

20 Ibid, p. 139. Also see Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p.48.

in which he advised the author to "charge your style with life". Emily Dickinson wrote to him, enclosing four of her poems, and asked: "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?"[21] Higginson used a figure from one of these poems to sum up his impressions many years later, after the receipt of this letter, when he said, "The bee himself did not evade the school boy more than she evaded me; and even to this day I still stand bewildered, like the boy."[22] The correspondence between Emily Dickinson and Higginson continued, with intervals, till her death and is the source of her views on poetry and art. Higginson first treated her as an oddity but with a little more knowledge of her personality, elicited through questions, he was able to read her poetry with some insight and offered advice whenever he thought it necessary. She received his advice gratefully but seldom incorporated them in the body of her writing. This attitude characterized her correspondence with him during the years to come.

Emily Dickinson had slightly known Helen Hunt Jackson when they were both little girls but the friendship between the two gained intimacy only in the closing decades of their lives. Mrs. Jackson had achieved fame as a poet and as a novelist, which seemed considerable at that time. At her death in 1885, at the age of fifty four, Emily Dickinson wrote: "Helen of Troy will die, but Helen of Colorado, never."[23] This was a

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21 Letters, Vol. II, p. 404.
22 Johnson, Emily Dickinson, p. 111.
23 Jay Leyda, Vol.II, p. 456.

tribute more to a popular author than to a friend and indicates the measure of Mrs. Jackson's success as an author. It is one of the strange paradoxes of literary history that Mrs. Jackson is not remembered today for the poems and stories which ceaselessly flowed from her pen and which seemed timeless to her contemporaries, but for her association with the recluse poet of Amherst to whom she paid glowing tribute in 1876 in a letter.[24]

> "I have a little manuscript volume with a few of yours verses in it - and I read them very often - You are a great poet - and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud. When you are what men call dead, you will be sorry you were so stingy."

In subsequent years, she implored Emily Dickinson to publish or at least to give permission for the publication of some of her poems in the anthology of anonymous verse to be published in the concluding "No Name Series" by Roberts Brothers of Boston. That permission was never granted. "How can you print," Emily Dickinson said, "a piece of your soul"?[25] But the refusal did not cool the friendship between the two and they remained on most affectionate terms till the end.

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24 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 245.

25 Quoted by Richard Wilbur in his essay, "Sumptuous Destitution", included in Emily Dickinson, Ed. Richard B. Sewall, p. 129.

IV

Emily Dickinson lived a lonely life and from the age of thirty, or near about, she gradually withdrew from society. In the closing decades of her life, she remained almost confined to the attic room of her ancesteral home. Death depleted the ranks of her relatives and friends. By 1885, her father, mother, Samuel Bowles, J.G. Holland, Charles Wadsworth, Otis P. Lord and Helen Hunt Jackson were all dead. In 1883 her nephew, Gilbert, died bringing to her a grief from which she did not entirely recover. Her own illness recurred more frequently and the horizon of her life must have looked very gloomy. She had seen suffering, waded through them, as she said in one of her poems which, Professor Macleish confessed that he could hardly read without restraining tears.[26]

I can wade Grief -
Whole Pools of it -
I'm used to that -
But the least push of Joy
Breaks up my feet -
And I tip - drunken -

She struggled against her failing health and recovered enough strength in 1885 to be allowed to move about in her room. The last note from her pen was a short message addressed to her Norcross cousins: "called back". She passed away peacefully on

26 See the essay by Macleish in Richard B. Sewall, Emily Dickinson, p. 156.

on May 15, 1886. Three days later, Higginson saw her carried across the blossoming meadows to the burial ground and for the last time saw her face, as she lay in the coffin, noted its youthfulness with "perfect peace on the beauthful brow."[27]

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27 Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 149.

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